JOHN CREASEY

Inspector West Alone

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from back cover

It never occurred to Roger West that anything faked about the message. He just assumed that his wife had run into trouble and needed help. So he went along, and got a knock on his head. And when he came to, he found himself being charged with the murder of a woman he though was his wife.

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CHAPTER I

LONELY HOUSE

EVEN now, it didn't occur to Roger West that there had been anything faked about the message. He was just afraid in case Janet had run into trouble.

You could spend your life walking into trouble with your eyes wide open and feel hardly a tremor. When you began to wonder whether your wife was in danger, you had a sick feeling of dread; assuming that you were in love with your wife, of course.

Roger stood outside the back door.

It was locked, like the front door and like all the windows. It was a small, lonely house, and he hadn't heard of the place until two hours ago. There was a rotting hurdle fence round the large garden, and the light was just good enough to show the distorted shapes of trees. Grass grew knee high on what had once been lawns. The gravel drive was covered with weeds.

There wasn't a light anywhere.

A chilly wind blew on to his back, coming across the open moorland and hilly country of Surrey. Low clouds threatened rain.

Except for the wind, there was no sound.

The message had been clear enough, but he hadn't taken it himself. Janet had telephoned Scotland Yard. Roger hadn't been in his office, so Eddie Day had spoken to her. Eddie wasn't a shining light, but a man who had been thirty years in the force and become a Chief Inspector; he didn't get messages wrong.

"Bit of trouble for you, Handsome—Janet 'phoned. All right, all right, you needn't get worried, there's nothing the matter with the kids! Janet's gone to see a cousin of hers, Phyllis—the one that lives in Surrey. She says can you go straight there to-night? Copse Cottage, Helsham— not far from Guildford. Difficult place to find,

she says. I've written the directions down."

The note was in Roger's pocket.

He'd followed the directions with ease; this was Copse Cottage. The big white stone at the corner, near the signpost, had been unmistakable. There'd been one odd thing about the old, rotting signpost; the pointing finger and the words Copse Cottage had been freshly painted, but the name-board, on the narrow wooden gate, hadn't been painted for .years.

The house was as dark as the night.

He'd been startled on discovering that there was no light back or front; worried when there had been no response to his knocking.

Janet *had* a cousin named Phyllis, who lived somewhere in Surrey. Roger had never met her, and didn't think Janet had heard from her more than twice in the past five years.

Be reasonable. Cousin Phyllis had probably been taken ill, Janet had hurried out here, taken things into her capable hands, decided to move Phyllis to a hospital, possibly even taken her to Chelsea. There was no reason to feel scared. He turned towards the front of the house. From here he could see the sidelights of his car, facing the main road and parked in the narrow, unmade lane. He would try once more at the front door, then go into the village—two miles away—and telephone home.

The lights of his car disappeared.

He stopped moving, and stared. Only one thing could blot those lights out—someone standing in front of them. They were still on; he could see a faint glow, and the vague silhouette of a—man ? Or Janet ?

No, it was a man. The lights appeared again. Yet he'd heard no footsteps, and any ordinary sound would have been clear. The vague figure was lost against the black outline of the car.

Then he heard a sound; of the car door, opening.

He shouted: *"Here!"* and broke into a run. The car door

slammed and the engine hummed. He was ten yards from the open gate when the car began to move, and it was twenty yards along the road when he reached the gate.

"Here!"

The only answer was the snorting of the car.

Alarm sawed at Roger's nerves. He ran, in desperate hope; the road was rough, the car couldn't make much speed, and would have to slow down at the sharp corner. But the pot-holes and loose stones made running difficult. He turned his ankle, grabbed at a tree to save himself and lost precious seconds and still more precious yards. The red light glowed, then turned out of sight as the driver swung the wheels towards Helsham.

What was all this? How could it be explained rationally? There was a touch of fantasy about it, as well— let's face it—as a touch of the sinister. *Had* Janet come here?

The sound of the engine faded into silence, and the wind was hushed, but his forehead felt icy cold. It was pitch dark now. He turned and stared towards the house, and could only just make out the outline against the lowering sky. Suddenly, gusty wind swept down upon him.

He could walk to the village and back to reason; or return and force his way into the house. He didn't like to contemplate the possibilities of what he might find. He couldn't give a name to his fears. The sensible thing was to go for assistance; he could get a car from the village and come here with the local policeman. It wasn't easy to be sensible when fears for Janet crowded upon him.

Then a light went on in the house.

* * * *

It wasn't bright; just the dim yellow glow. It was on the first floor, above the front door; *and it moved*. Suddenly a shadow, large and shapeless, was thrown against a window. Someone was carrying the lamp from one room to another. It passed the window,

and only a faint yellow glow remained; then it shone more brightly from another window, and became steady.

Janet?

She would have heard him call out, would have-shouted after him by now.

Roger walked quickly towards the house, staring at the lighted window, but he could no longer see a shadow. As he turned into the open gate, another gust of wind swept down on him—and as the howling died, he heard the scream. Wild, shrill, eerie, it played on his taut nerves like a saw on an iron bar; and he knew that it d woman's scream.

* * * *

He smashed a stone against the glass of the window, and the crash was like an explosion. A splinter of glass cut the back of his hand, but he hardly noticed it. He bent his elbow and broke off the jagged splinters which stuck out from the side, then groped for the window-catch. It sprang back sharply, and he pushed the window up.

It was pitch dark inside the room.

He used his torch for the first time. The beam shone upon oddments of furniture, the mirror of a huge sideboard, and a door. He climbed through, but heard no more screaming. Whoever had carried that lamp must have heard the window crash, but there was only silence. He reached the door, pulled it open and stepped into the passage. A faint glow of light came from upstairs, enough to show him the narrow stairs themselves, the gloomy hall, the glass in the picture-frames hanging on the walls. He put out his torch and stood quite still.

There was no sound, no movement.

Had he heard that scream ?

His teeth were set so hard that his cheeks hurt. He went slowly towards the foot of the stairs. Now that he was more

accustomed to the light he could pick out the banisters, the shiny handrail, the dark, blotchy wallpaper.

He must go upstairs; he wasn't a victim of nerves.

He started up the stairs, keeping close to the wall to avoid creaking boards. The light still glowed, dimly yellow. He reached a small landing and stood quite still, from the first attack of nerves, warning himself to be careful. There were three doors, one of them wide open, and the light came from this room. He stepped softly towards it, and peered inside. It was an empty bedroom; empty, that was, as far as he could see. A huge double bed, with big brass knobs on the posts, stood against one wall. Backing on to the window was a huge Victorian dressing-table with a big centre and narrow wing mirrors. The oil-lamp, without a shade, stood on this, and the light was brighter here because it was reflected from the mirrors.

He went to the foot of the bed and peered to the other side—and saw nothing.

Had that scream been a freakish trick of wind ?

He knew it hadn't; he also knew that it might have been uttered to bring him here. Whoever had lit that lamp must still be near——

Hold it!

While he had been rushing towards the window and breaking in there had been time for man or woman to run down the stairs and leave the house by the back door. He couldn't take anything for granted. He went into the room, picked up the lamp, which gave off a grey smoke and an oily smell, and placed it on a chest on the landing so that it gave more general light. Then he approached the first of the two closed doors. He took out his handkerchief and wrapped it round the handle before turning it. The door opened without difficulty, on to another, smaller bedroom, as empty as the first.

And silence——

It was broken suddenly, eerily, by a sound he placed at once, but didn't want to hear; by moaning.

The, crying wasn't loud, but sounded clearly because of the general quiet. Undoubtedly it came from behind that closed door. It wasn't easy to tell the difference between a man moaning and a woman; but he thought this was a woman, and saw a picture of Janet in his mind's eye.

Roger moved slowly to the door, repeated the trick with the handkerchief, and pushed—but the door was locked. The moaning was continual now, low, frightening, working on his nerves. It was a stout door, and there was no key in the lock. He put his shoulder against it and pushed, a practised trick which would open a flimsy door in a modern house, but it had no effect on this one. He drew back and flung himself at the unyielding wood; all he did was to hurt himself.

The moaning went on and on.

He turned and hurried down the stairs, using his torch. He found the kitchen at the first attempt, and opened the door cautiously; there was no one there. Another door led to a scullery; there was always a scullery and wash-house in an old cottage of this kind. The scullery was drab, and cobwebs hung across the window. He opened a cupboard and found what he wanted: an axe, lying rusted and dull on the cement floor, near a few logs and a heap of kindling wood, thick with dust. He wrapped his handkerchief round the grimy axe handle and went back upstairs.

He approached the door determinedly.

He swung the blade of the axe powerfully against the panel just above the lock; the wood caught the blade and held it, he had to wrench it out. That eerie sound didn't stop. He smashed again, and splintered the wood; smashed on with fierce urgency until a strip of the panelling lay on the floor. He thrust his hand through

the gap, hoping for the unlikely—a key on the inside.

There wasn't one.

He smashed again and again, until the lock gave way and the door sagged open. By then, he was dripping with sweat; and the moaning sounded louder. He shouldered the door wide open, flashed on his torch, and stepped inside the room.

A man was pressed tightly against the wall, and Roger didn't see him until he came leaping forward.

Sharp nails clawed at Roger's face, a knee came up and caught him agonizingly in the groin. As he reeled back against the swinging door, hands clutched at his throat and squeezed; powerful, claw-like hands. He tried to use the axe as a weapon, but couldn't get it into position. He felt the air locked in his lungs, his chest heaved as he tried to breathe, as blackness descended upon him. He struggled, kicked, but he couldn't free himself.

He slumped to the floor.

CHAPTER II

THE DARK ROOM

IT was dark.

That was all Roger realized at first;—darkness and pain that was little more than discomfort at his chest, and a smarting soreness at his face. He didn't know what had happened until he heard a sound—a moan. Then everything flashed back.

He was lying on the floor.

He couldn't see where, but the moan was so near that he knew he was in the room.

There was a dull pain in his groin, and when he tried to get up, the pain became sharp and he collapsed, grunting. The moaning went on—a steady trickle of sound. He turned gently on to his right side, and began to get up. His head swam, but he managed to stand. He put out his right hand and touched the wall, swayed towards it and then leaned against it; his lungs still felt tight and locked.

Outside, the wind was howling.

He heard a different sound, neither the wind nor the woman—rather that of a car on the road. It faded. He bent down, and the blood rushed to his ears as he groped for his torch, found it, and switched it on. The light was so bright that it hurt his eyes. He didn't switch off, but swivelled the light round slowly until at last it fell upon the woman.

She lay on a single bed, two yards away from him, one arm hanging over the side—a slim white hand. Her body was flat, and she lay on her back. Her clothes were dishevelled, her long legs, sheathed in nylon, were nice legs. As the light travelled up, he saw enough to judge that she was young and comely; not her face, the light didn't touch her face yet—just her body. Her white blouse was open at the neck. The light fell upon the point of her chin, and it

might be Janet's. Then it travelled to her face and her head——

He dropped the torch.

It crashed on to the floor and went out, plunging the room into darkness.

When the worst of the shock was over and his mind began to work, one thought came absurdly into it: how could she be alive? How could anyone so injured be alive?

Then he heard the car again—much nearer. He didn't at first realize what it was, but when the engine stopped and a door slammed, he knew that someone had arrived outside. He didn't move, but stared towards the bed. He heard footsteps, and then a heavy banging on the front door.

Someone shouted; he didn't catch the words.

He said aloud: "I'm a policeman. I'm used to seeing dead bodies."

He wasn't used to such a sight as that—or to the thing which brought the real horror—the possibility that the woman was his wife. Dark skirt, white blouse, long, slim legs, long, slim, slender arm and hand—he had seen the right hand, which had been ringless; Janet wore no rings on her right hand, but she often wore a dark skirt and a white blouse.

There were other sounds, now, of men walking in the house, then along the passage. He heard them talking, but still couldn't catch the words. There were two or three men downstairs. They started to come up. He put out a foot, feeling for his torch. He didn't touch it. Faint light appeared; the men were coming cautiously and carrying a torch.

He licked his lips and called: "Who's there?"

The footsteps stopped on the instant, and the light went out.

He called: "It's all right. Who's there?"

He heard a shuffling sound, and then the creaking of boards—and suddenly a beam of light stabbed into the room and into his

face. He shut his eyes against it, before he saw the two husky men and the third, behind them. Next moment, he felt powerful hands on his arm, and he was held tightly. When he opened his eyes, the torch light was shining towards the bed.

For a long time—minutes—no one spoke. Then one of the men said in a thick voice:

"You swine."

Roger said: "Don't be a fool. I——"

"Shut up!"

He didn't want to talk, explanations could come later. And these were policemen; before the night was out, they would be turning somersaults in order to please him. Two of them were police-constables, anyhow, the third was in plain clothes. Roger didn't recognize his lean face, and that wasn't because of the poor light. He couldn't be expected to know every plain-clothes man in the Surrey C.I.D. What he was expected to know didn't matter. Fear had been driven away for a spell, but came back in waves of terror.

Was that *Janet?*

The man in plain cloths said: "Better have some more light. Light the lamp outside, Harris."

"Yes, sir." Harris, the policeman nearer the door, seemed reluctant to release Roger's arm. When he did, the other man held on more tightly, and hurt; but that wasn't important, all that mattered was finding out whether the woman was Janet.

The woman had stopped moaning.

The plain-clothes man approached the bed.

Roger said: "Look at her right shoulder."

The man, his back turned on Roger, appeared to be shining his torch into her face.

"Look——" began Roger.

"You keep quiet," said the big policeman, and dug his fingers more deeply into Roger's arm.

"This will be the doctor," said the plain-clothes man.

Harris came in with the lamp, alight but turned up too high and smoking badly. He stood it on the dressing-table, and the plain-clothes man told him to be careful not to touch anything. He trimmed the lamp clumsily. After the darkness and the beam of torchlight, it seemed a soft, gentle but all-revealing glow.

Roger said in a taut voice: "All I've asked you to do is look at her right shoulder."

"The plain-clothes man was tall, with thin features; and the light made him look yellow.

"Why?"

"See if there's a mole at the back of her right shoulder—egg-shaped."

"Want to make sure you got the right woman?"

"You can be funny afterwards."

"With you, no one will ever be funny again," said the plain-clothes man. He made no attempt to look at the woman's shoulder. She lay absolutely still, and hadn't moaned again. It was better that she should be dead than alive, but—the question hammered itself against his mind, filling him with wild terror. Was she *Janet?*

He forced himself to speak calmly.

"Will you please look at her right shoulder and tell me if there's a mole on it?"

The plain-clothes man said: "Take him downstairs, you two, and ask Dr. Gillik to come upstairs at once. If the squad car has come with him, tell them to be very careful what they touch and to start on that downstairs window. I'll send for them when I want them. Oh, I'd better have the photographer up at once."

"Yes, sir." Harris and his companion pulled at Roger's arms.

A mole—and it was Janet. No mole—not Janet.

Roger got one arm free, and then sensed what was coming. He turned his head. A ham-like fist smashed into his nose, blinding him

with pain and tears. The woman and the plain-clothes man became shapeless blurs. He felt himself dragged out of the room. Then one man took his arm and bent it behind him in a simple hammer-lock, and pushed him downwards. The other followed. There were men in the hall, including a middle-aged man with greying hair and carrying a black bag; "doctor" was written all over him.

"Inspector Hansell would like you to go straight up, doctor, please." .

"What's this all about?"

"Very nasty business, sir."

Cold grey eyes scanned Roger's face. The doctor didn't speak, but couldn't have said more clearly: "And you've got the man, good." Roger was thrust into a small front room, where a lamp burned, then pushed into a chair.

"That's too comfortable for him," said Harris. "Get up— sit on that chair."

"That chair" was an upright one.

Roger didn't move.

"I told you to get up!"

It wasn't worth arguing. He stood up, then sat on the other chair, which was near a big, heavy, old-fashioned standard lamp. He didn't realize what Harris was at until cold steel pressed into his wrist, and a lock snapped. He was handcuffed to the standard lamp.

So this was what it was like on the other side of the law; how they dealt with a suspect. No, be just. They hadn't really manhandled him; Harris had been justified in striking him when he had tried to get away, and couldn't really be blamed for the power he'd put into his punch. The handcuffs were justified, because he'd made one attempt to escape.

His arm, stretched out, began to ache.

Men were going up the stairs.

What had brought them so quickly and in such force?

Harris, red-faced and bucolic, kept staring at him.

Roger said slowly and deliberately: “I want to send a message to Inspector Hansell from Chief Inspector West of New Scotland Yard.” Harris started. “I want to know whether that woman has a mole at the back of her right shoulder, and I want to know quickly.”

Harris shrugged.

“When the Inspector wants to hear from you, he’ll tell you. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Damn you, find out about that mole! Tell him that I’m West. Get a move on!”

Harris was startled. The other constable grunted, and they exchanged glances. Then Harris said: “I’m Queen of the May.” But he went out of the room and made his way up the stairs; they creaked at every step. The other man, husky enough but smaller than Harris, moved to the door; as if he didn’t want to become inveigled into conversation.

When Roger heard Harris’s ponderous tread on the stairs again, the nightmare became reality. He sat upright, straining his eyes and his body.

A man spoke to Harris, whose rumbling voice came clearly; his words had nothing to do with Janet. Roger half-rose from his chair, and the constable at the door growled:

“Don’t try anything.”

The rumbling went on, then stopped; Harris appeared. A word burst out of Roger.

“Well?”

“No mole.” said Harris.

CHAPTER III

WHY ?

THE dead woman wasn't Janet. Janet was alive, free, Janet was——

Janet *wasn't* here.

And what about Cousin Phyllis?

What was behind all this?

As a frame-up, it was nearly perfect.

Once accept the possibility that someone had wanted to lure him here and have him accused of murder, and the rest followed easily enough. But swallowing that wasn't easy.

The sobering process continued.

Everything had been laid-on, even the call to the police with the convincing warning that it was a case of murder. Nothing else would have brought Hansell and his squad along so fast.

He must get one thing clear. Hansell had been summoned so that he, Roger West, youngest C.I. at the Yard, could be caught in the house with the dead girl. Was he right in thinking he had only to convince Hansell that he was West, and the situation would switch in his favour?

He'd been found on enclosed premises, with a girl battered brutally, and with an axe by his hand.

Roger murmured to himself: "I'm in a spot."

"About time you realized it," Harris growled.

Roger shrugged and stood up. He could do that without pulling the standard lamp over. He hadn't a chance to get away, but both policemen moved towards him. He turned away from them and looked into an oval mirror above the mantelpiece. This was the first time he had seen his reflection since he had come round, and it gave him another shock.

His face was a dark blotch, looking sinister and brutal.

* * * *

Hansell came in. Roger didn't notice, because he was still staring at his reflection. The panic was subsiding into reason. His face was badly scratched, the scratches had bled a lot, and the blood had dried on it, in a brown mess which looked black in the mirror. He put his right hand to his cheek and felt a sharp pain in the back of the hand, looked down and saw the long cut in it—the cut which he had received from the window-glass.

Then he was aware of Hansell standing behind him and staring into the mirror. He turned. The two policemen had gone out, and the door was closed.

"Admiring yourself?" asked Hansell. "Who are you?"

"I'm——" Roger paused, as the vital question reared up in his mind again; would he be wise to allow this frame-up to succeed, for the time being?

"Aren't you sure?" Hansell sneered. "Perhaps you've a split mind. Why were you so interested in that mole?"

"My wife has a mole just where I asked you to look."

"So that makes you not a wife murderer."

"That's right."

"Stop fencing. Who are you?"

Roger liked Hansell; he had a feeling that the man was a good officer, one in whom there was a full sense of responsibility. Once Hansell was convinced of the truth, he would hold his tongue.

"Roger West, Chief Inspector, Scotland Yard."

"So you remember you've told Harris that. Mind if I see your wallet?"

Roger moved his left hand to get it, and the handcuff stopped him. "Help yourself."

Hansell took out his wallet. In the poor light, this was an eerie experience, but he faced it out. He didn't look at the wallet, but at Hansell's lean, narrow face and the drooping lips—this man had the

face of a cynic. Several letters were in the wallet, and Hansell took them and turned towards the light. Only then did Roger see that it wasn't his wallet; it was brown, his was black; this was much thicker, too; and he saw a wad of one-pound notes, many more than he ever carried.

"That's not——" he began.

"Three letters, addressed to Mr. Arthur King—at least you got the number of syllables right," Hansell said sardonically. He probed into the wallet. "Driving licence— Arthur King. What gave you the idea of pretending to be a policeman?"

Roger sat down heavily.

"You're Arthur King, of 18 Sedgley Road, Kingston-on-Thames," Hansell said, "and I charge you with the murder of a woman, as yet unknown, and warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence. Any legal quibbles about that?"

Roger said slowly: "It'll do, for now."

"I still want to know why you pretended to be West."

"Work it out later, and don't try any rough stuff, Hansell." Roger spoke sharply, seeing the other's hands clench. "What's your evidence? Wholly circumstantial? I was in the room with her, you saw me and jumped to the conclusion and charged me. That story ought to please your superintendent and give the magistrate apoplexy."

"You were near to the axe with which she was killed," Hansell said. "Your prints are on the axe, on the torch you were using, and they're all over the place—including the window, where you forced entry. That girl put up a fight and clawed your face, and skin and blood off your face are under her finger-nails."

Roger said: "I didn't kill her. I was outside, heard a scream, broke in, and then heard moaning. I broke the door down with an axe and when I went inside, a man attacked me and knocked me out. I hadn't been conscious again for five minutes before you

arrived."

"How did you get here?"

"By car."

"What car do you use?"

"A Morris 12, supercharged engine, registration number SY 31."

Hansell laughed. "That's why a Chrysler with registration number XBU 31291 is parked in the road outside, I suppose."

That made the frame-up as near perfect as one could ever be, by breaking down the story of how he had approached the house. His assailant had scratched his face to make it look as if he had struggled with the girl. There was even a chance that he'd transferred blood and skin from Roger's cheeks to the girl's fingers; he would be as thorough as that, and yet it didn't make sense. How could the man prove that a senior officer of the Yard was someone else ? How could he hope to make that stand up ?

He couldn't.

He stood a chance of proving that Roger had been pretending to be someone else.

"Why not give up trying. King?" Hansell asked. "We've caught you with everything."

"Then you ought to be happy."

"I'll be more satisfied when I know why you killed that kid upstairs."

"I'll be more cheerful when you start looking for the murderer. Give me a cigarette, will you?" He always kept his cigarettes in his hip pocket and couldn't reach it with his free hand.

"No, I don't smoke them. I wouldn't give you a cigarette if I did. Harris!" Hansell raised his voice, and the door opened at once. "Go through his pockets and put everything from them on the table," Hansell ordered. "You stay here with them. Lister." So the other big constable was named Lister.

Hansell went out, and Harris began to go through Roger's pockets. Out of the right-hand jacket pocket he took a slim gold cigarette-case; not Roger's. From the waistcoat, a lighter, watch, and diary—none of them Roger's. He was used to the idea now—that his assailant had taken everything out of his pockets and put someone else's stuff in its place.

P.C. Lister made a note of everything, calling it out aloud as Harris placed it on the table.

Hansell came in.

"Finished?"

"Yes, sir," said Harris.

"Anything marked with 'R.W.'?"

"No, but several things have 'A.K.' on them, sir."

"Good enough," said Hansell. "Sergeant Drayton is outside, and he'll take you and the prisoner down to the station. He can be tidied up, but before that I want you to scrape some of that dried blood off his face, and keep it. You can give him something to eat, and let him have a packet of cigarettes but no matches—when he wants a light, he will have to ask for it. Don't let the Press get at him. Take him in the back way, and see that he doesn't see anyone except our people."

"Yes, sir."

Harris unlocked the handcuffs. Roger rubbed his wrist gently. Both policemen kept close to him, and once they were in the hall, Lister held his arm tightly, just above the elbow. Outside, there was a blaze of light with silver streaks stabbing through it; rain was coming down heavily. The lights came from several cars parked in the lane, most of them facing towards the road and Helsham, but one, a glistening American model, was facing the other direction; this was "Arthur King's" Chrysler.

He got into the back of a car. Harris sat next to him, Lister took the wheel, and a bulky plain-clothes man, presumably

Sergeant Drayton, sat next to the driver. Roger watched the other cars as they passed slowly, and then saw the big white boulder and the newly painted signpost.

He sat back and closed his eyes, feeling Harris's arm against him. If he made a move, Harris would use that ham of a fist again. There was no point in trying to escape, anyhow, Harris could rest easy. His thoughts flashed from one thing to another. But for that girl's face and head, this would be laughable; farcical.

They were going cautiously down the steep hill, which Roger had come up, in third. There were several dangerous corners, and none of them was marked, because the road was little used. The headlights shone on the spears of rain and the leafless hedges bent beneath the fierce March wind. Road and banks glistened. Trees stood out like grey spectres, and dropped behind, only to be replaced by others. Roger saw lights, some distance ahead—the lights of Helsham Village, but they would go on to Guildford. Whom did he know at Guildford?

The driver turned a corner and then jammed on his brakes. All of them were jolted forward, Roger before he caught a glimpse of the road block or of the men who darted forward the moment the car stopped.

CHAPTER IV

HOLD-UP

THE glow of the headlights shimmered on the rain, on huge branches of trees which had been flung across the road, and on a man who stood huddled up in a raincoat, with a hat pulled low over his forehead and a gun pointing towards the car. Roger saw other men, one of whom wrenched open the driver's door and poked a gun inside.

Harris grunted and grabbed Roger's wrist. Cold steel brushed his hand, and then the handcuffs clicked—he was manacled to Harris.

"Take it easy." The man who poked the gun into the car had a smooth voice. A scarf, tied round the lower half of his face, served as a mask. "Do as you're told, and you won't get hurt."

"You're crazy." That was Sergeant Drayton, in a shrill voice.

"Not so crazy as you'll be if you try to pull a fast one. We want West."

"No one named West——" began the driver.

"Okay, forget who it is, we want your prisoner—he's a pal of ours." Bright eyes showed in the pale light inside the car. "Get out, pal." He looked at Roger.

They were remarkable eyes; like silvery fire.

"We're the police!" howled Drayton.

"We'd still want our boy friend, even if you were the Army, Navy, and Air Force rolled into one." The gun swivelled towards Roger. "Get out."

The door by Roger's side opened; another man with a gun stood there. The rain hissed down until wind caught it and sent it in a wild flurry about the car.

"I can't——" Roger began.

"You can, pal. And hurry, we haven't got all night."

"That's enough of this," said Harris heavily. Harris was good—ten times better than Drayton. "You clear off, the lot of you." He might have been talking to a crowd of gapers gathered about a street accident. "This man's our prisoner. Clear off."

"I'm handcuffed to him," Roger said. It wasn't easy to make the words sound casual, or to try to sum this up; except to see that it was the next stage in the framing.

Why?

Harris sat back in his seat. It would be no fun trying to get him out of the car by force, he must weigh sixteen stone.

"He's got a key, hasn't he?" The man with the strange eyes said harshly.

"I told you to clear out," Harris growled. "Another car will be along in a minute, and then——"

"We'd make fools of more policemen," said the spokesman. The rain hissed and spattered, and the wind howled; it was bitterly cold. "If you know what's good for you, you'll unlock those handcuffs."

"Oh, will I," said Harris. He moved his left arm. Something bright glistened in the light, flew across the car and out of the door and into the hedge—the key; it would take hours to find it.

Then the door at Harris's side opened.

As Harris turned, a man struck at him with the butt of a gun. The heavy blow caught him on the chin. Quickly, the man with the gun tipped Harris's helmet over his eyes and struck again—not savagely but with cold calculation.

Harris slumped down, and didn't move.

"Look here, you're crazy!" gasped Drayton.

"That's right. You just do what you're told."

By then, men were dragging Harris out of the car, shoulders first. Roger slid towards the door. The tug at his wrist was painful,

but the man eased Harris out gently. In five minutes Roger crouched over Harris's huddled figure, still fastened to him by the single handcuff.

The rain pelted down.

"Take it easy," said the man who had knocked out Harris. Another came forward and held Roger's arm, so that the steel connecting bar of the handcuffs was visible, and Harris's hand hung limp from it. The new-comer started to work with a small file, and the rasping sound was added to the night's wild bluster. Water trickled down Roger's neck, was bitterly cold on his sore face. His clothes began to get soggy. The two policemen in the front of the car did nothing, for they were still covered by the gun. The man with the file seemed prepared to work all night; but he didn't, the job took only five or six minutes.

Soon they were moving down the hill.

* * * *

Roger simply let impressions rest on top of his mind.

Take one detective. Lure him to a lonely cottage with a faked message. Kill a helpless girl. Make it appear that he'd killed her. Give him a false name. Capture him from the police, and use his real name so clearly that the police couldn't mistake it. *Then* take him away.

"Cigarette?" asked the man by his side. Those fantastic, silver-fire eyes showed.

"Thanks."

The man lit cigarettes for them both, handed one to Roger and sat back. It was too dark to see his face clearly, but he had pulled down the scarf, and the cigarette glow showed the pointed tip of his nose. They turned off this narrow road to the main road which ran through Helsham and then towards London. The car was powerful, and well sprung.

"Enjoying yourself?" asked the man next to Roger. His voice

and manner didn't go with his eyes.

"So-so."

"I must say you take it well, policeman. I think we'll be able to work with you."

"Sooner or later you'll be asking yourself whether I'll work with you," said Roger, "and that'll be the question that matters."

The man laughed, as if he had no thought of failure.

"Another question, just to set my mind at rest," said Roger, making himself sound casual.

"Let's hear it."

"My wife?"

"Expecting you home, probably. Unless she's telephoned Scotland Yard, to report you missing."

There was no reason why he should believe the man, but he did. He felt much easier in his mind. Janet had been used as a decoy, and it wasn't much good blaming Eddie Day for his mistake. They sped on, carving an avenue of light through the blustery darkness. They soon reached the Guildford by-pass and drove along the wide road between rows and rows of small houses. There was little traffic. The car in front, as large and powerful as this, was never more than twenty yards ahead of them, and so made sure that no one cut in. A car with a blue "Police" sign coasted along in the opposite direction, and the man by Roger's side laid a hand gently on his knee.

"I always heard it said that if there was such a thing as a good policeman, it was Roger West," he said.

"Thanks. But I'm just a beginner."

"If you behave yourself, you'll have a lot more time and promotion ahead of you. Care for a drink?"

"No thanks."

"You'll have one, just to please me," said the man by his side. "It'll taste all right—Scotch. You won't notice anything wrong with

it, and you'll have a nice rest for a few hours. After that, we'll talk business."

"And what if I spit it out?"

"Then you'll get the same treatment that the ox had back on the road."

As he spoke, the man took a flask from his hip pocket. He unscrewed the cap and then switched on the roof light. He had a narrow, pale face, and those flashing eyes had long, dark lashes. His hand was as steady as the car would allow. Roger took the flask; it certainly smelt like whisky. The whisky warmed and encouraged him.

"That'll do." The man took the flask away and screwed the cap on. "If you stay as sensible as this, we'll get along."

Roger leaned back, comfortably, not yet drowsy. He didn't know what road they were on now. Both cars sped through the night, and the rain came down in silvery streaks.

Gradually drowsiness came upon him.

* * * *

Roger knew that he had slept a long time, because it was daylight when he woke. He lay in a comfortable bed, drowsy, unaware of any aches or pains, but his face felt stiff, and so did the back of his left hand. He felt no sense of alarm, even when he remembered what had happened in the car; he felt as if he were awake in a dream. He closed his eyes for a few minutes, opened them again and looked round the room. It was small but nicely furnished; more a woman's than a man's. On the dressing-table was a bowl of daffodils, heads drooping. Chintz curtains at the narrow window matched the flowered chintz on the bedspread, the eiderdown, and the two easy-chairs. The furniture, of light oak, was reproduction. There was a corner wash-hand basin.

All he could see out of the window from the bed, was the grey sky.

He knew that he ought to get up, but didn't feel inclined to move. His mouth was dry—parched; the thing he would like most was tea. Weak, hot, sugarless tea, pints of it. Then he had a mental picture, of a battered head. That was his first bad moment since waking, he was really beginning to *feel* again. He pushed back the bed-clothes and sat up. His legs were stiff; he swung them over the side of the bed. His head began to ache. When he was steadier, he walked slowly to the window. He looked out on to a trim lawn, daffodil beds and, beyond a beech-hedge with massed brown leaves, trees. There were some dark firs and pines; but mostly they were leafless trees, spiky-looking beech and birch; silver birch. He heard nothing —absolutely nothing—but the tops of the trees were bent by the wind. So sound didn't come into this room through the window. The window was a single pane of glass, and when he examined the frame, he saw that it was really a false one—this window wasn't made to open. He pressed nearer and looked upwards, studying the glass. It had a yellow tint, a characteristic of toughened glass.

Roger went to the door.

It had a handle, but no lock—no keyhole. He tapped on it gently, and it didn't sound like wood, it was more like steel. If he tapped louder, to make sure, he might attract attention. Well, why not? He turned from the door, and searched the room. He was wearing a pair of pyjamas with a broad blue-and-white stripe, and at the foot of the bed was a dressing-gown and a pair of slippers, but no day clothes were in sight. He looked inside the wardrobe; there was nothing but clothes hangers.

He caught a glimpse of his face, and it surprised him because it was so normal. He went closer to the mirror, his face reflected above the daffodils. He could see the pink scratches and the shiny, greasy salve which had been rubbed into them after the blood had been cleaned off. His hand had been treated with the salve, too—

that was why he felt little discomfort. He studied his face. By habit, he laughed when they called him “Handsome” at the Yard, but it wasn’t really a surprising soubriquet. His curly fair hair was ruffled, but undoubtedly it had been combed the night before.

He went to the wash-basin, washed his hands and face carefully in tepid water, and dabbed them dry. As a result the pink streaks turned red. They tingled, too. He went to the door and banged on it with his clenched fist, and then stood back and waited for someone to come.

Before long, he heard footsteps.

CHAPTER V

MARION

HE knew, before the door opened, that a woman was outside. The footsteps were quick and light, and he heard them distinctly, which argued against the door being steel. He heard a key scrape in the lock, so it had a lock on the outside. He sat down on the bed, looking towards the door.

The girl came in, started back when she saw him, then smiled, and closed the door. He caught a glimpse of a man who remained in the passage outside.

"Good morning," the girl said brightly. "Is there anything you want?"

"Tea," Roger said. "In urns, if possible, or pint mugs."

"Some will be sent up in a few minutes."

"Cigarettes and a lighter."

"I can give you a cigarette," she said, "but I am not allowed to leave matches with you, or to let you smoke when you're alone."

She took a small plastex case from a pocket in her pale-grey frock, and a lighter. She had to come near, to light his cigaretteˆ Few men would complain at being near her. She wasn't beautiful, she just looked—good. It was in the clear grey of her fine eyes, the soft colour of her cheeks, the curve of her lips. She had a heart-shaped face, and light-brown hair—he supposed she would call it auburn. It was cut short, and if the waves and curls were machine-made, he would be surprised. Her hands were not small, but were well-shaped, and her nails were varnished a pale pink— pale enough to look natural.

He drew at the cigarette.

"All right?"

"Yes, thanks. Who are you?"

“You may call me Marion.”

He leaned back, nursed his knees with his hands, and looked at her without frowning.

“That’s thoughtful of you. What are you going to call me?”

“Mr. King.”

“Oh, I’m a king again, am I?”

She backed away until she reached one of the arm-chairs, and sat on an arm. She crossed her legs. She wore a long dress, but it didn’t hide the shapeliness of her ankles or the lower part of her legs. She was slim, but not too thin, tall for a woman.

“Did you patch up my face last night?” Roger asked.

“Yes, how does it feel?”

“As if it needs patching up again.”

“Now?”

“Yes, please.”

She went to the wash-basin and opened the cupboard above it, took out a small pot of white salve, and came towards him. “Sit up straight,” she said, and when he obeyed, she took some of the salve on her fingers and began gently to rub it along the scratches. When she had finished, she stood back and said:

“What about your hand?”

He held it out obediently.

“Thanks very much,” he said when she had finished. “You’re as good as a trained nurse.”

“You have to learn a little of everything.” She seemed anxious to make sure that he didn’t think she was a trained nurse. She was somehow wary, watching him as if he might attack her. She glanced out of the window, and for the first time he caught a glimpse of her profile. She had a short nose, slightly tip-tilted, and tiny pale-pink ears. In every way, she was a wholesome creature, and the word “goodness” came to his mind. Then he imagined her as she would be with her face smashed in.

The door opened.

This time, he'd heard no footsteps.

A man came in, a little fellow wearing a white jacket, with a grey, bullet-shaped head and mournful brown eyes. His brown shoes were polished brightly enough to attract attention. He carried a large tray with the experienced poise of an accomplished waiter, and placed it on the bedside table. Roger ran his gaze over the tray. The oddest thing was the ivory knife; more like a very blunt paper-knife than a table-knife. There was tea, toast, marmalade, butter—plenty of them all—and two plates under silver covers.

"I should sit in bed and have it," said Marion.

"I never like breakfast in bed."

"You don't want to overdo anything," she said, but humoured him by placing an upright chair in front of the table. He poured himself out a cup of tea; ah! He finished it before he lifted the covers. By then, the waiter had gone.

Porridge; and eggs and bacon.

The bacon was cut into small pieces; he could manage the egg with the ivory knife. All these things added up to one unavoidable conclusion. He didn't speak of it. The girl sat on the arm of the chair, her legs still crossed, watching him or looking out of the window. He finished every scrap.

"Wonderful!" the girl said.

"What's wonderful?"

"Your appetite."

"You haven't seen anything yet," said Roger. "Now, I'd like to shave."

"I'll arrange it." She leaned forward and pressed a bell by the side of the bed, and the little waiter came in. Without a word, he took the tray out. The girl followed him, saying at the door: "I won't be long."

When she had gone, he went to the little cupboard above the

hand-basin. There were no scissors; no razor; nothing made of steel. He waited for ten minutes, as far as he could judge—he had neither watch nor clock. Then the door opened again, and the girl and the waiter came in; the waiter carried a little black bag.

The waiter spoke for the first time in a voice that was unmistakably Cockney, from the very heart of the East End.

"Goin' to git in bed, or sit in front've the mirror?"

"I'll sit in front of the mirror," Roger said.

"S'right." The man went over to an upright chair, then opened his little black bag. Out of it he took a large pink sheet. Roger sat down, the sheet was tucked round his neck in a professional manner. Then he was lathered and shaved with a safety razor. They weren't even going to take a chance that he could snatch a cut-throat from the "barber's" hand!

He was regarded as dangerous; the girl, presumably, considered him a dangerous lunatic.

* * * *

No knife, no razor, no weapon of any kind, no clothes, no watch or clock, no newspapers, neither pen nor pencil; at least, there were some books. These were on a little shelf in the bedside table. He glanced at the titles. They were mostly classics—the popular classics, Scott, Dickens, Macaulay, Trollope—with a book of verse and two modern novels. He didn't open any of them, but went to the window again and looked out on to the trim lawn and the nodding daffodils and the trees which crowded upon the garden—an impenetrable mass of them, many more than there had been at Copse Cottage. How far was he from Copse Cottage? How many miles had they travelled after he had lost consciousness? Why was he here? When would he see his silvery-eyed companion of the night before ?

The waiter brought his lunch, and stood by while he used the ivory knife again. Five minutes after he had finished, Marion came

in with coffee on a tray, and two cups and saucers. He was sitting in an easy-chair by the window.

"Do you mind if I have coffee with you?"

"I was hoping you would."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Mystified, but quite content."

"I'm "so glad." She passed over the "mystified" and poured out the coffee.

"Thanks. When are you going to tell me all about it?" Roger asked.

"There's nothing I can say." She was earnest.

"Do you think I'm mad?"

"No, of course not!" Coffee spilled out of the jug into the saucer. "That's ridiculous. You haven't been well, but you're getting better, and soon you'll be perfectly fit again. I want to help you. I wish you'd talk freely to me."

"What about?"

"Anything that comes into your mind."

"Applied psychology? Or psychiatry? Or what?"

"Just talk. It always does one good to talk."

"Supposing I talk about my wife? And the boys." She had the wary look again, and he decided that Mr. Arthur King had neither wife nor children. She poured the spilt coffee from his saucer into her cup. "Janet isn't like you, except her hands. Hands reveal a lot —did you know?"

"Yes," she said.

He made himself sound dreamy. "The only known infallible ways of telling one person from another are by comparing the tips of the fingers and the lines on the soles of their feet; it's easier to take finger-prints than footprints. But I was going to talk about my family. Janet we'll take for granted. The boys—there are two of them. The elder is Martin, but we call him Scoopy. Odd name, isn't

it?”

“I rather like it.” She was pretending to believe him.

“It’s grown up with him. Scoopy’s a big chap. Rising six. Tough as they come and a plodder—he takes life pretty seriously. Richard is a year younger and a very different kettle of fish—he takes life as it comes, a gay young man who will go places if he can only develop half of his brothers power of concentration. You don’t believe a word of it, do you?”

“Please go on.”

“Why don’t you believe it?”

“Please go on.”

“Why do you work for a killer?”

“I just have my job to do.”

“Being handmaiden to a murderer shouldn’t appeal to you.”

She smiled.

“Do I strike you as being insane?” he demanded.

“I can’t talk to you about that,” she said. “I know you have dreams—nightmares. The dreams are good, the nightmares—I’ll help you to forget them, help you to sleep without them. It’s only temporary, as a result of the strain. Don’t worry about them. Just tell me about them. That’s all I want you to do. You won’t shock me. I’ve heard so many strange stories and helped so many people. Just tell me about the worst of them. Please.”

What did they want to do? Make him think that he was crazy?

CHAPTER VI

NIGHTMARE

HE could hear the moaning. . . .

And he could see the girl with the battered face and the white blouse and her hand lying over the side of the bed.

The nightmare gripped him with a feverish intensity, and went on and on, but was always exactly the same— the girl, the moaning, clearer, louder, clearer, louder. He wanted to shout, and opened his lips and screamed; but no sound came.

Then, he was awake.

The nightmare was no longer real, just vivid memory. He lay in the darkness. He felt the hot sweat bathing him, and his arms, legs and face twitching. He peered up at the darkness of the ceiling, and felt afraid. He didn't try to move. He had only to stretch out his hand and switch on the light, but he didn't want to. He had to overcome this new terror—a terror of the dark.

This was the third night of these nightmares.

It was always dark when he woke; and he knew that if he submitted to the terror and gave himself light, then he would have lost a battle.

He heard no movement, but suddenly it was no longer pitch dark. He opened his eyes. A small light burned by the door, which Marion was closing gently behind her. She wore a dressing-gown, her hair was in a net, and she was smiling reassurance. She came straight to him, and her hand was cool and gentle when she pressed it against his forehead. She went to the basin and damped a sponge, came back and sponged his face and hands; he wanted her to go on doing it.

"You'll be all right, when you've told me about them," she said. "If you'll only tell me, there's nothing more to worry about."

She'd said that a dozen times in the past three days, but always in daylight. She hadn't come in just after he had recovered from a dream before. He lay looking at her fresh, wholesome attractiveness, and felt that he hated her. She was the only human being he had spoken to, except the waiter, since he had first come round. She was always the same, and nothing he could say would make her change her attitude—he was ill, she was there to help him. He'd tormented himself, trying to fight against it; just as submission to the fear of darkness would mean a lost battle, so would the narration of his dream to her.

They could make him dream; they had.

"You'll feel better soon," she said softly.

He sat up.

"Water, please."

She went and got him a glass of water. He sipped it, looking at her all the time.

She was like Janet.

It wasn't just her hands; she was like Janet. If Janet were here, he would feel better. Being away from her was agony in itself. Knowing that she was worried, frightened because he was missing, was perhaps the worst thing of all, except that insistent question—why?

He hadn't seen a newspaper or heard the radio, he had no idea what was happening outside in the world. Whenever Marion came in, there was always a male guard at the door, and he had no doubt that the man was armed.

"Tell me what it was about?" she whispered, and leaned over him.

He mustn't lose the battle.

"I'm too hot."

"I'll take off the eiderdown." She stood up, and folded the eiderdown back, took off one blanket, folded it and laid it across an

easy-chair. “Lie down,” she said, and when he obeyed, she lay on the bed beside him. She was cool and impersonal; it wasn’t as if a girl were lying there, but someone unreal and unhuman; unhuman, not inhuman. “Just tell me about it.”

That quiet, insistent demand was always the same.

“You’ll feel much better.”

So was the promise.

They wanted to make him lose the fight, wanted him to talk to her, and he’d be damned if he would let them win. They could try as much as they liked, but-

He started.

“It’s all right, I’m with you,” she said.

He wasn’t thinking about her, now, but the idea which had come suddenly. It made him want to laugh, and he hadn’t felt like laughing since the first morning he had seen her. The next stage wouldn’t be reached until he had talked, until “they” thought he had succumbed.

“Just tell me——”

He shook off her hand, sat up sharply and pushed her away.

“Mr. King——”

“Get out! Get away. I hate the sight of you!”

“If you’ll only——”

“Get out!” He pushed her again, and then suddenly raised his hands and clutched her neck. He didn’t hold tightly, but enough to scare her. She called sharply “Come in!” He was still clutching her neck when the door opened and two men sped into the room. One held his wrists and forced his hands from her neck, the other helped the girl from the bed. Then they went out and left him alone.

He felt cool, now—cool and more in command of himself because the cloying helplessness had eased a little. He had a plan of campaign. Three days had sapped his energy and dulled his mind, making it soggy, filling it with one obsession—and he hadn’t seen

the obvious, that nothing further would happen until he had done what she wanted him to do—talked freely.

He got up and went to the window.

There were stars, but it was very dark. He went back to bed and closed his eyes, and felt rested. He waited, and waiting was an agony in itself. Judging time was almost impossible, but before he tried again he must wait. It wouldn't work unless he waited.

He wanted a cigarette, but the only time he was allowed to smoke was when the girl or the barber-waiter were with him—which meant that, ostensibly, they were afraid he would set fire to the room. Everything they did was done to convince him that he was a dangerous lunatic.

At last he decided that he had waited long enough. He went back to bed—and began to shout.

"No, no no!"

Nothing happened.

He screamed again. *"No, no, no!"*

Was he losing his reason? Could a sane man lie here and shout like that, in an otherwise empty room, with no one to hear him ?

The light came on.

Marion stood in the doorway, smiling, calm. The light was just above her head, and her face was framed in that wispy auburn. She closed the door gently.

"Did it come again?"

"I—I can't stand it." He licked his lips, and wondered whether he appeared frantic enough to be convincing. Apparently he did, because she went to damp the sponge again, came back and bathed his forehead, face, and hands.

She lay down beside him.

"Tell me," she said.

"It's—so foul. Foul." He made his voice break. — "Yes, it must be, but don't worry—I'm used to hearing all kinds of strange stories.

The nightmares will stop when you've talked about it."

He told her the simple truth of what he had seen in Copse Cottage. His voice kept breaking, twice he stopped and turned his head away from her, his body becoming rigid; and each time she rested a hand on his arm and waited, until he went on again hoarsely.

Strangely, he felt easier in his mind.

She put an arm round his shoulders and her face was very close to his.

"Don't worry," she said very quietly. "Just go to sleep."

"What—what time is it?"

"It's the middle of the night. Don't worry, just go to sleep. You won't dream."

* * * *

He didn't dream.

* * * *

It was full daylight when he woke, and the sun was shining. He felt more rested and calmer than he had for three days—now nearly four. He lay for a while, looking at the sun shining into a corner of the room, then got up and went to look into the garden. The grass smiled, and the daffodils' heads were raised; the scene was beautiful and as quiet as his mind. He didn't ask himself whether he had succeeded in doing what he had set out to do. He knew that he had; and that although he might have to pretend again, this part of the ordeal would soon be over. Marion brought him his breakfast. The man with the white jacket and the mournful face shaved him.

Afterwards, Marion brought in a suit of clothes.

* * * *

Except for a handkerchief, there was nothing at all in the pockets, but Roger felt more himself, fully dressed. The clothes fitted well. He wasn't allowed a tie, the shirt had a collar attached.

He was brought a pair of leather slippers, but not shoes—and therefore no laces.

Marion allowed him twenty minutes to dress, and then came in. She left the door wide open. No one was in the narrow passage behind her. She looked fresh, with nothing to show that she had lost so much sleep during the night.

"Would you like to walk round the garden?"

"Er—may I?"

"Yes, it's a glorious morning," she said. "And afterwards you can sit downstairs for a while, a change will do you good. Did you sleep well after I left you?"

"Er—yes."

"No dreams?"

"No."

"I told you so," she said; and she had.

He laughed inwardly, but was haunted by an uneasy feeling; she had prophesied it, and it had happened—her "cure" had worked.

The passage was narrow, with cream walls. There were four doors in it. It led to a landing and a narrow staircase, and he didn't think that it was the front of the house. Downstairs, in a small hall, Marion took an overcoat from a peg and helped him on with it, slipped a coat over her shoulders like a cloak, and then opened the door. The sun shone brightly on them, warm and spring-like. It was good to breathe fresh air.

A bent old man approached a herbaceous border, but quickly disappeared. The beech-hedge was higher than it had seemed from the window—seven or eight feet high, and it looked thick; it wouldn't be easy to get through or over that hedge. As they walked, Marion talked idly about trivial things.

At the end of the garden Roger stood and looked at the house.

There was nothing remarkable about it. The walls were grey,

most of the windows small—only those on the ground floor appeared to open. Radio music came from one of the rooms. He guessed she didn't want him to study the house closely, and she pressed his arm gently. He turned— and as he did so, a man appeared at a ground-floor window.

He knew it was the man who had talked to him after the hold-up. Even at this distance, those silvery-steely eyes were unmistakable.

CHAPTER VII

NEWSPAPERS

THE man withdrew, as if anxious not to be seen.

Roger kept his face blank, let his gaze roam past the window towards the daffodils near it. He knew that Marion was looking at him intently, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. She held his arm lightly and exerted a gentle pressure as they moved on.

"What is the matter?"

"I'm all right."

"You must learn to tell me exactly what passes through your mind when you're frightened."

"I'm not frightened."

"You are," she said, and he couldn't look away from her any longer, had to meet her eyes. They were so clear and grey—restful eyes. "I felt your arm go taut. Unless you talk freely, you won't get better," she said. She hadn't talked so openly before about his being ill. "Why don't you trust me?"

"You've been very good."

"I want to help, that's all, and I think I can."

"How many other patients have you had here?"

"Quite a lot. I've been able to help some of them, and I'm very anxious to help you."

"Why don't you tell me what's the matter with me, instead of hinting?"

"Don't you know what's the matter?"

"No." He tightened his lips. "I'm as sane as you are. I want to leave here."

"You may, as soon as you're well."

He pulled his arm free and stalked ahead of her, and she made no attempt to catch him up. The gardener went on working and

showed no interest in him, behaving as if this were an everyday affair. He walked across the lawn glancing towards the window where he had seen the man with the fierce silvery eyes, but without staring. He caught a glimpse of the man, standing by the side of the window with a hand at the curtains.

He turned, and saw that Marion was walking slowly across the lawn. The sun shone on her hair, filling it with golden lights, giving her beauty. He waited for her, feeling —and looking—like a sulky schoolboy. She made no reference to what they had been saying.

"I expect you're tired, you'd better come indoors."

"I'm all right out here."

"It's the first time you've been out for several days, you shouldn't overdo it," she said. She took his arm again and drew him towards the side entrance to the house. This time there was no doubt; she pressed gently against him. He went into the house, which seemed gloomy after the bright sunlight, and she led the way to a door on the right —overlooking the back garden. Was it the room where the man had been?

It was large, pleasant, sunlit—a drawing-room, furnished with the same taste as his bedroom. In one corner, near the window, was a grand piano, and on it a huge bowl of daffodils and early tulips. Freshness seemed to come from them. There were several sofas and easy-chairs, the carpet was pale green and yellow, on the cream-papered walls were water-colours—good ones. She led him to a chair and waited for him to sit down, pulled up a small table on which was a box of cigarettes and a table lighter. She offered him a cigarette.

"Thanks."

"Just sit here for a while. I'll see you again soon."

She left him with the lighter—the beginning of trust. The door closed softly behind her. He fought back a temptation to jump up and follow her, and as he began to sit down, saw the newspapers.

The sight had a curious physical effect. He stared at them—at this first contact with the real world in four days. The papers were in a rack, near the piano, with several magazines. He went across and picked them up. Before he did so, he thought: "It's a trick." They would be old newspapers, of no real interest.

They weren't; there were four, each a *Daily Cry*. The first dated March 14, the day he had left the Yard. He looked at the others; *March 15, 16, and 17*. He looked at the second, and the headline leapt up at him:

GIRL MURDERED IN LONELY COTTAGE.

The body of an unknown girl, her face savagely mutilated, was found by the police in Copse Cottage, Helsham, one of the loneliest parts of Surrey. The killer had smashed a window in order to force entry, and broken down the door of the girl's room with an axe.

There was a great deal more, but nothing about Roger or the hold-up. He dropped the paper and picked up the next.

GANG RESCUES KILLER—
POLICEMAN SAVAGELY ATTACKED

There was the whole story; much more than there had been in the first paper. He scanned it swiftly, for names. The man who had been charged was "believed to be Arthur King, with an address at Kingston-on-Thames"; there was nothing about Roger West. He glanced through the rest of the paper quickly, seeking only headlines, and found what he wanted on an inside page—a short paragraph with a small heading: Yard Man Missing.

Chief Inspector Roger “Handsome” West, youngest C.I. at Scotland Yard, left his office late on Monday afternoon, and has not been seen or heard of since. The Yard authorities believe that West, who has been working at high pressure for several months, may be suffering from loss of memory or some other illness.

POLICE HUNT MURDER GANG

There was much more behind that; he could see the wary hand of the Yard, requesting the newspapers to play down the fact that he was missing. There was no photograph, nothing to suggest a hue and cry, nothing to hint that his disappearance might be in any way connected with the murder. He picked up the fourth paper—that morning’s.

Everywhere in Great Britain the police are seeking the gang which rescued a killer from a police guard near Helsham, Surrey, late on Monday night. It is believed that an arrest will shortly be made. The rescue, described fully in yesterday’s Cry, was the most daring in police annals.

The dead girl has not yet been identified. There was nothing at the house where she was found to suggest that she lived there, and the house has been empty for several months, the owner, Mrs. Ethel Malloy, being abroad. The police theory is that the murderer made an appointment with the unknown girl who discovered his evil intentions too late and locked herself in. Her face was so badly mutilated that photographs cannot help with identification.

Sir Harry Gregg, chief pathologist at Scotland Yard, says that the girl was probably in the early twenties, but there were no distinguishing marks on the body. The police are anxious to have details of any young woman who has been missing from her home since Monday last, and who answers the following general description: Height: 5 ft. 6 in.; medium to dark hair; blue eyes; well-

developed; Weight: 10 stone 4 lb. At the time of her death, the victim was wearing a pleated black-serge skirt, white-silk blouse with four mother-of-pearl buttons the size of two-shilling pieces, a three-quarter-length coat to match the skirt, nylon stockings size 9½ (French make), black suede shoes, rayon underwear (peach colour). The names of the suppliers and manufacturers of all these articles of clothing had been removed.

* * * *

Roger groped for another cigarette and lit it without thinking of that token of trust—he was left with a lighter. There was plenty to go on; absence of name tags shouldn't prevent the police from tracing the clothes. The "French make" introduced a difficulty; was it possible that the girl had come from France? No more than an outside possibility.

He was thinking almost as if he were at his office. He turned the pages, and again found what he wanted— another reference to himself, this time with a small photograph; and a poor one.

YARD MAN STILL MISSING

Chief Inspector West (photo side) still missing from the Yard and from his home in Bell Street, Chelsea. There has been no trace of his movements since he left the Yard late on Monday afternoon to keep an appointment with his wife. The police theory that he is suffering from loss of memory is supported by his wife, who says that the pressure of work for the past few years has affected his health.

Nonsense! Janet knew better. Janet had been visited by the pundits, had been told what to say to the Press—and the pundits were still influencing the Press. There was not a hint that he was even remotely connected with the Copse Cottage murder. Janet, by now, would be in agony of mind.

* * * *

So mystery was piled upon mystery. The dead girl was unknown, which meant that the Yard wasn't getting far in its inquiries. That was trivial, compared with the greater mystery—what did these people think they were going to do with him? Why had they brought him here, why had they identified him with Arthur King, and then talked so plainly during the rescue that the police must realize that he was in fact West? Why had they treated him like this, as if trying to convince him that he was ill, in need of treatment—that his mind was unbalanced ?

What good was he to anyone if the Yard had reason to believe him to be a killer? He lit another cigarette.

He stood up and went to the window, looking into the garden, and then saw that this window was exactly the same as the one upstairs—of toughened glass, and without a movable frame.

He turned from the window and picked up the newspapers again—and then he heard a sound behind him. It made him swing round. A shutter was falling over the window from the outside, a shutter like a Venetian blind, blotting out the sun from the top half of the window, then descending over the bottom half. When the shutter was nearly down he rushed to the window and touched the glass, but there was nothing he could do. All he could see was a little of the lawn and the heads of a few daffodils; they disappeared when the shutter fell right into position, and he was left in absolute darkness. Only the glowing tip of his cigarette relieved it, and that faded when he stopped drawing at it.

He heard no sound, now—just stood with his back to the window, staring into darkness.

He heard a whirring noise, which came suddenly, and turned his head to the right. Then he saw light—a beam, as from a powerful torch, shining on the opposite wall. There, the wall was bare. The light hit the wall, much like that from a cine-camera and

about the same shape; it made an oblong of light, two yards across, a yard and a half down. Yes, it was from a small projector, and the whirring was explained, they were going to put on a film. He forced himself to walk slowly to a chair facing the wall: he could just pick it out, among the other furniture. He sat down and crossed his legs.

A picture appeared.

A girl was walking along a narrow street—that was all. He didn't recognize the street, but there were things in it which told him that it wasn't in England; more likely, France. The terraced houses were tall, and the windows had shutters fastened back against the walls. There were several little balconies at the higher windows. The street was empty, except for the girl, who appeared to be walking towards him. She looked tall. She walked quickly. She was smartly dressed and seemed thoughtful. In a way, she wasn't unlike Marion; but he might also say that she wasn't unlike Janet. She kept on walking—was the street as long as that, or was it a trick of the camera ?

She turned into another street where there were more people, into yet a third. This was a wide busy thorough-fare. He caught a glimpse of a single-decker bus with a crowd of people standing on the platform at the back— peculiar to Paris.

The dead girl had worn French nylons.

He had forgotten that sharp nervous fear of the sudden darkness, was absorbed in the pictures.

The girl was lost among the crowds; no, not quite lost, she appeared occasionally, once stood and looked into a shop window —at handbags. Then she walked on—and there was a cut in the film.

Another picture came, this time of a small cafe, with a big striped awning over a dozen or so small tables, a waiter standing in white jacket by the open door, one couple drinking out of long glasses. Then the girl appeared and sat down as far as she could get

from the couple. The waiter approached her; she shook her head, said something, indicated that she was waiting for a companion. The waiter took up his position in the doorway. The girl lit a cigarette, adjusted her long skirt, looked up and down the street. Twice she glanced at her wrist-watch. She began to frown.

She opened her handbag, and took something out—a letter? She studied it closely. Yet her eyes didn't move from side to side, as they would have done had she been reading. She put the thing down, and he saw that it was a photograph; he thought it was of a man, but couldn't be sure. The girl finished her cigarette, and began to tap her foot on the ground.

Then a shadow appeared over her.

She glanced up—and although the frown disappeared, she didn't smile, but looked anxious. She said something, and Roger wished this weren't a silent film, then scoffed at himself for the inanity of the thought.

The shadow grew into a man, who had his back to the camera. He pulled up a chair and sat down. The waiter reappeared. The man with the girl leaned forward and hid most of her from Roger. The man was hatless; he had fair wavy hair which needed cutting. There was something familiar about him; Roger couldn't place it. Then the man turned, as the waiter approached, and Roger caught a glimpse of the profile—and sat up, a chill shiver running up and down his spine, a physical thing which he couldn't prevent.

It was his profile.

He had never seen that girl in his life before, but he was sitting there as if in the flesh and talking to her.

The picture faded.

But the whirring continued, it hadn't finished yet. The light seemed bright. The sweat on Roger's forehead was cold; this was getting on his nerves, he could sense unnamed terrors hidden from him.

Another picture flashed on-

Of the girl—without a face, or with a face that was unrecognizable. She was just as he had seen her at Copse Cottage.

And then a man spoke from a corner of the room.

“Why did you do it, West? *Why?”*

CHAPTER VIII

CONVERSATION

ROGER hadn't heard him come in; hadn't dreamt that anyone was there. He started violently, and peered towards the corner. He could see a vague shape, which faded as the light from the projector died away.

"Why did you do it, West? *Why?"*

There was nothing sinister about the voice; it was just a man's, earnest, rather grim. He'd heard it before, in the car driving down the hill near Helsham.

The man moved; Roger heard the sound, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Why don't you tell me? Why did you do it?"

The man moved again.

Light came on, not bright, just a single wall-lamp near the door; everything in this affair seemed to be played out in semi-darkness. The man was little more than a shape, but his eyes were like silver fire.

"Why did you do it?"

"I don't get this. I didn't do it." The denial sounded weak, even to Roger; he wasn't really on top of himself.

"Who do you think will believe you?" the man demanded.

"Anyone with sense."

"Anyone who sees that film, and knows the rest, will believe that you killed her, West."

Roger turned and sat down. The cigarette-box was on its side, and the cigarettes were spread over the table. He took one and lit it; it was a relief to smoke. The man stood staring at him.

"What do you want?" Roger asked, heavily.

"I want you to get some facts straight. Don't you remember

going to Paris? Don't you remember going to the cottage?"

"I haven't been to Paris for over a year."

"You could have seen her then."

"I didn't see her. I've never seen her before."

The man drew nearer.

"West, you don't seem to realize your position. You went to Paris and saw that girl—the camera doesn't lie, the film is here, a copy of it can be sent to Scotland Yard. You went to Copse Cottage, you were alone there when the girl was killed. You appeared to be someone other than yourself—to fool the police. You were rescued by friends, who nearly killed a police-constable. Your colleagues at the Yard think you killed the girl. The evidence is so strong. That film, proving that you knew her before and had an affaire with her, gives you a motive. You met her by assignation in a lonely country cottage. You arranged that someone should telephone the Yard with a faked message, pretending to come from your wife, but you didn't realize that your wife would deny having sent such a message. You thought you'd get safely home and no one would suspect you, didn't you? But you didn't have the

Roger said: "One of us is crazy."

"No one at Scotland Yard would believe that you're crazy. You're too well known, too clever. This has all the hall-marks of a crafty crime—the kind of crime that a man who knows the law might commit. You're a policeman." The voice maintained its monotonous level, there was no sneer, no hint of a gloating smile, it was just factual. "You know how the police build up their cases, you've often collected the evidence to send a man to the gallows. You've briefed the prosecuting counsel a hundred times. Imagine him being briefed with all this evidence! That you once went to Paris; that this girl is French; that you saw her there; that she came to England and threatened to break up your home life; that you planned to meet her and to kill her, to save your domestic life from

collapse. Don't just tell me that you didn't do it. West, tell me what you think a prosecuting counsel would make of it."

Roger said: "In every trial, there's a defending counsel, too."

"I'll leave you to think it over," said the man abruptly. He put his hand to his pocket, pulled out an envelope and tossed it into Roger's lap. He turned towards the door, and as he went out of the room the shutter began to fold up, and sunlight came in through the window again.

Roger fingered the large envelope, which seemed to have several folded papers inside. He groped for another cigarette. His hand was unsteady when he took the contents from the envelope. There were three smaller envelopes, each of them stamped with a French stamp; each with a Paris postmark, each with a blue sticker reading *Par Avion*, each addressed to Arthur King, at 18 Sedgley Road, Kingston-on-Thames. The writing was large and feminine, the ink bright blue. He took out the first letter, and the words which flew up at him were: *"My darling Arthur—"*

The writing was the same as on the envelope. The address was simply: Paris, with the date. He scanned the first. It was a love letter, as from a woman pouring out her heart. It was a good letter, written in fair English with a few odd turns of phrase, and an occasional word or expression in French; the signature was "Lucille." There was a postcript: *"Soon, I must see you, when can you come?"*

He opened the second letter, dated two weeks afterwards, and the first words were the same, and then it went on with a fierce directness which shook him badly. *"I am coming to see you. Yes! I am able to come to London, very soon. I am delirious with the delight of it. Cheri . . ."*

The third letter was very brief; she would be in England on Saturday, March 12, and he was to write to her at the Oxford Palace Hotel, London, to say when and where he could meet her.

* * * *

He could tear the letters up and be no better off. They would have anticipated that, would have photostat copies, and there would be other letters, too, not just these three. Letters addressed to Arthur King, and passionately written. Put these into the hands of the prosecuting counsel together with everything else, and no jury in the country would acquit him. The film was faked. It wasn't hard for experts to fake a film, and it might be possible to get other experts to testify that it had been faked, that one had been placed upon another—but by itself that wouldn't be a defence. He had been superimposed on the picture; that was all—a simple technical problem. Someone had photographed him, taken away the background—or it needn't be a faked film! Make-up could create features like his for the purposes of a film.

He went back to his chair and read the letters through again and felt something of the passion in them and knew one thing; Lucille had been in love with the man to whom she had written. They weren't faked; they had a quality which reflected sincerity. So Lucille had had a lover, and had come to London to see him.

Who was the lover?

The man with the fiery eyes?

* * * *

The man came in again.

* * * *

Roger really saw him, this time. Apart from his eyes there was nothing remarkable about him. He had a thin face, not ugly, not handsome—a vague kind of face. His lips were unusually well-shaped and red. He had brown hair, brushed straight back from a high forehead, with a wide centre parting. He was dressed well in dark grey, but apart from those eyes, he was just an ordinary man. He walked easily, smiled, and sat down.

"Have you read them?"

"Yes."

"Have you asked yourself what a prosecuting counsel would say?"

"The defence would want proof that the letters were addressed to me."

"Oh, they'd have proof. Admirable proof. From two or three blameless people who would swear that you often went to 18 Sedgley Road to collect these letters—irreproachable witnesses. West. Do you like it?"

Roger said: "Not much. When are you going to tell me what it's all about?"

The man laughed—as lightly as if this were a normal conversation, and Roger had made some casual quip.

"Now you're being sensible," he said. "You're half-way towards doing a deal. Before you've finished you'll have to come all the way, because it's the only thing that will save your neck from being stretched. I'll tell you, later, possibly to-morrow. I've one or two other items of information for you. This house is a private asylum. You're not the only borderline case they've had here. The doctor, like those witnesses, is irreproachable. The staff is thoroughly trained. Some time ago, a Mr. King was brought here by his friends, because he was a psychopathic case and given to moods of violence. He received treatment for a few days and was released. He came back once, before this week. He came when you were away from the Yard on special jobs, and you would have great difficulty in proving you had been somewhere else. He was a fair-haired man, who might be mistaken for you. The only two members of the staff who really saw him at close quarters and could be sure it wasn't you, were the male nurse who shaves you and the doctor. Your own nurse never saw him—nice girl, isn't she? She's very sorry for you. She thinks that you've committed some violent crime and are under the proper treatment. The doctor who is prescribing

for you will swear that Arthur King and you are one and the same. The theory will be, of course, that as Roger West you knew something was going wrong with your mind, you called yourself King and submitted to treatment. Now the defending counsel might make something of that, but—think what the prosecutor would say."

Roger said harshly: "Do my thinking for me."

"Very well. The prosecutor would say that this was all carefully planned, so that if you were caught, you would be able to offer evidence that you were a mental case. The resident doctor here would swear to it, but others would say—truthfully—that if a man wants to pretend that he's over the border he can do so, and fool almost anyone. You've simply fooled this resident doctor."

The man laughed.

Roger eased his collar.

"The case rests," said the other easily. "Spend the rest of the day and to-night seeing if there's a way out of it. If I were in your shoes, I'd come to a conclusion pretty quickly. The only courses open to you are to play ball with me or kill yourself. And if you don't play ball with me, you will kill yourself. Your body will be found with those letters in your pockets, and a veil will hastily be drawn. Your wife will have a bad time for a while, but she'll get over it. It's surprising how quickly human beings recover from the worst of shocks, and she'll have plenty of helpers. Your friend Mark Lessing will help her to bear the burden stoically, won't he? And he'll probably become step-father instead of uncle to your two boys. Nice kids, I've seen them several times. What's the name of the elder one? Something unusual, Marion was telling me—she doesn't believe you've any children, of course, she just thinks you're a bad case. A violent case, who——"

There was just so much one could stand . . .

At the first mention of Janet, Roger had felt his muscles

tensing; at mention of the boys, he'd felt a savage hatred which locked him in his chair. And that question—"what's the name of the elder one"—brought a vivid picture of Scoopy, big, eager, and trustful, looking at him. Rage took possession of him, and he leapt up, smashed at the blurred face, hit something—and felt agonizing pain in his stomach, from a kick.

Next moment he was surrounded by a surging group of people, fighting wildly. His right arm was forced behind him in a hammerlock, he felt sick with the pain. He saw three men as well as his tormentor; two were holding him, one of them was holding something that looked like a coat harness. In the doorway stood Marion.

Marion said: "Oh, please——"

The men ignored her. Roger's arms were forced through holes in the "coat"; and he knew it wasn't a coat, but a strait jacket. There were tears in Marion's eyes.

He was taken out of the room—upstairs; not into his own room, but to one much smaller—a padded cell.

* * * *

He stayed there for the rest of the day and during the dread, dark night. There was a couch on which to lie. Before daylight had faded, two men had come in and fed him with a spoon; that was the only food he had. He couldn't rest; dozed fitfully, and dreamt as soon as he dropped off. They weren't nightmares, and he wasn't sure whether they were dreams of waking or sleeping. He saw Marion with tears in her eyes, and Janet, with the two boys.

When daylight came, he was lying on his back on the couch, looking at the ceiling: at least that wasn't padded. There was a small window, set high in the wall, and no sunlight, although the morning was bright enough to tell him that the sun was shining; and outside there was a quiet, bright and happy world. Happy! He tried doggedly to reason with himself, but always came back to the

ultimatum: to do what the other man wanted, or to be killed—they'd make it seem like suicide. Suicide depended a lot on motive, and there was one strong enough. Any man who had gone to these fantastic lengths wouldn't bungle a "suicide".

But it wasn't as simple as the man had made out. He could choose, now, between living and at least pretending to help—and no pretence would satisfy his mentor for long —and dying, and thus defeating the man's mysterious purpose. That was a simple fact. If he refused to "play", he would be killed.

He could make sure of bitter victory by refusing to play.

But that wouldn't avenge the dead girl.

It wouldn't help Janet.

It wouldn't give Scoopy and Richard back their father.

He lay, unmoving, even when the door opened; movement wasn't easy, once he was lying down. He expected to see the two male nurses, but instead it was Marion. She smiled at him, closed the door, determinedly, came across, and as he started to sit up, helped him. Then without a word, she began to unbuckle the strait jacket, at the back. She took it off.

His arms were numbed, pins and needles began to run up and down them; agony came. She rubbed his arms briskly.

"Do you feel better? More rested?"

He didn't answer.

"I'm so desperately anxious that you shouldn't have another relapse," she said. "I felt sure that you wouldn't hurt me. You mustn't attack your friends, you know."

She spoke with great simplicity, as if to a child whom she was anxious to impress. He looked at her with his head on one side, and wondered what she would think if she suspected the truth. Was she sincere? Had the man told the truth about her? If so, she might become a useful ally.

"You understand, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I am going to ask them to let you return to your room again. I think perhaps you were out too soon after the last attack. Dr. Ritter believes in giving patients every possible chance."

At last Roger had a name: Dr. Ritter. It brought reality a little nearer.

"I'll soon be back," promised Marion.

She didn't close the door.

That was deliberate, either because she was putting him on trust, or because the man wanted to find out whether he was desperate enough to try to escape. What could he escape to? The certainty of arrest and the near certainty of conviction; it would be crazy to try. He couldn't try anything. He was forced back to the choice; whether to "play" or whether to let himself be killed. He'd play, of course; he'd have to play.

Marion was soon back, and her face was radiant. No one was in the passage outside.

They were on the second floor; they walked down to the first, and she led him into the bedroom in which he had first come round. He went straight to the window, for he wanted to see that real world beyond the beech-hedge. He saw three men talking together: the gardener, a tall, thin man with a hooked nose, and the man whose eyes impressed themselves so deeply on his mind.

Roger gripped Marion's arm.

"Who are the men in the garden?"

"Don't pretend you don't know the doctor!"

"Ritter—the tall man." He didn't have to think that out very deeply. "Who is the other?"

"Don't be silly, Mr. King."

"I've seen him before somewhere, and can't place him." He put his hand in front of his eyes, as if to shut out a dread vision, and her voice became soft and soothing again as she led him towards

the bed. He sat down, but didn't lie flat. She said quietly: "That's your very good friend, Mr. Kennedy. He brought you here."

Marion went out.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME

KENNEDY came in during the afternoon; the sun was low in the west, and Roger had finished lunch an hour— or was it two hours? —ago. Kennedy came in softly and closed the door behind him, and Roger looked up but didn't move. Kennedy was smiling a faint, sardonic smile. He came straight across and offered cigarettes.

"Aren't you scared of me?" Roger sneered.

"I shall never be frightened of you. West," said Kennedy easily. "I've only to call for help, and my friends here will come at once. They know they're dealing with a dangerous lunatic. Have you had time to realize the hopelessness of your position?"

"I'd like to change it."

"You can," said Kennedy softly. He walked to the window and looked out, beyond the trees. "Out there, the world is going on much the same as usual. Your wife, your children, your friends—all of them are living, eating, sleeping, behaving normally. If you ever want to go back into that world you'll have to do what you're told."

"It would help to know what you want."

Kennedy turned the full force of those shimmering eyes on him.

"I want you, West," Kennedy said quietly. "The man and the policeman. Your knowledge of crime and of police methods. I want the expert on criminal investigation. The man who knows Scotland Yard as a doctor knows his patient—and better. I want inside knowledge of the C.I.D. All the tricks of the policeman's trade. You can lay your finger on anything at Scotland Yard, and I want everything. I want you, not part of you. Mind, body, soul, if you're fool enough to think you've got a soul. The rest steps out and I take possession."

He meant every word.

His eyes were the true guide to his mind; he wasn't sane, or he wouldn't ask for the impossible.

He said: "No, I'm not mad, West."

"What's in your mind?" Roger asked roughly. "To send me back to the Yard, whitewashed?"

"Forget it. You're wanted for murder. I've made the evidence too strong. If you ever left here alive and alone, you'd swing. Thinking about escape won't help you. You can only escape to death."

Be rational; use reason.

"It sounds wonderful. I work for you and forget my past."

"You haven't got a past."

"Wife? Family?"

"They're alive. They're well. They're not in danger. Forget them."

"Every C.I.D. man in the country, every patrol man, every village copper, every journalist, and about thirty million people who'll know what I look like when the Yard really releases this story, will be on the look-out for me."

"They won't find you. You won't look yourself. You won't be yourself."

Roger swung round, to stare into the peaceful grounds, to convince himself that this was happening, to grope and gasp. Kennedy didn't speak or move. A thrush flew down and drove a dozen sparrows away from crumbs which lay white on the lawn.

"Make up your mind," Kennedy said.

"What do I get out of it? I'm to lose plenty."

"You'll be alive."

"I suppose I'm to live on air."

Kennedy threw back his head and laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound, but high-pitched and grating; it matched his eyes.

He clapped his hands together, crossed the room and slapped Roger on the back. Roger stood rigid, although the touch was loathsome.

"You're like the rest, Roger! High-minded while you've no temptation. What you mean is—what's in it for you?"

"Well, what is in it for me?"

"A fortune. An easy life. Plenty of the right kind of company. Do what you're told and put your best into it, and you can have the world."

"But nothing out of my past?"

"Nothing," said Kennedy.

Roger said: "You say you want the man as well as the policeman. Both have memories."

"It's easy to forget." Kennedy's voice was soft, now, almost a hiss. He turned away, as if to hide the glitter in those frightening eyes. "I know it's easy, because I've forgotten." He was haunted by memories at this moment, they crowded upon him and he fought them away savagely. "You won't remember anything for long, not in a way that hurts. You'll think of the others as dead. Going to play. West?"

There was more in it than this: the whole plan wasn't unfolded, only a corner was turned up.

"I don't want to die."

"You don't have to. Will you play?"

"It looks as if I'll have to."

"You'll be given paper and pencil," Kennedy said. "Write out a list of all the senior officers at Scotland Yard, and their special duties. Indicate the particular qualities of each man. Make a precis of the way the organization works. That'll fill in your spare time for the rest of the day. Make sure it's right in every detail."

He went out abruptly.

* * * *

There was no great betrayal in this; few secrets; none Roger

need give away. He wrote until his fingers and wrist ached. The male nurse came in with his evening meal, and took away all he had written.

Night came slowly, but he wasn't tired. He had a watch, now, all the cigarettes and matches he needed, and whisky; the beginning of the "easy" life. His mind was alert, things were crystal clear. His first task was to convince Kennedy that he would really "play". There'd be trick-tests and crafty traps, and he would have to be on his guard every waking moment, until Kennedy was finally convinced of his goodwill.

He began to think, dispassionately, of how he could send word to Janet and the Yard, and if he found a way, whether he should do it. Janet, when vexed and sharp-voiced if he'd worked too late, had a trick of gibing: "You're a policeman first, man second." There was truth in it; never more truth than now. The battle was on—a strange, tenuous, bitter battle.

* * * *

He was asleep when Marion came to him. For a moment, he thought it was Janet. He started up. Only the dim light was on, and she sat on the bed, looking fragile.

"What is it?"

She said : "I'm terribly frightened."

"You're frightened!"

"Yes."

"Why? What's happened?"

She asked: "Who are you?"

Beware the traps.

"Don't you know?"

"I thought—you were Arthur King."

"Aren't I?"

"*He* called you by another name."

"Who? The doctor?"

“No. Kennedy.”

“When?”

“I heard you talking in here to-night.”

She might have; much more likely she was in the plot and came as an *agente provocatrice* from Kennedy.

“Forget it,” he said roughly.

“Please! Don’t raise your voice. I want to help you, if you’re in trouble. I saw a photograph——”

“I’m ill. You know that.”

“But are you?” She gripped his hands tightly. She wore the woollen dressing-gown, and it parted at the neck; her nightdress was of pink silk. “I’ve been unhappy about you, you seemed so rational at first, not like the others. I thought——” She paused, and her fingers pressed hard enough to hurt.

“Well?”

“I thought it was because I—liked you.”

“That’s happened to me before.”

“Oh, *please*. Tell me the truth. If you’re someone else I can get a message sent for you. It would be a hideous crime to keep a sane man here. Perhaps I could tell your friends, or the police. I have time off to-morrow, and can go into the village—to London—anywhere. I want to help you.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Then let me get some sleep.”

She drew back, as if he had struck her, and her eyes seemed filled with pain. Could any woman act like that?

She went slowly towards the door; for the first time, her shoulders drooped as if the vitality had been drained out of her. She opened the door; there was still time to call her back.

He let her go.

* * * *

The safety razor felt unfamiliar in his hand, but he didn't cut himself. When he looked into the mirror afterwards, he saw that the last traces of the scratches had all but gone.

The male nurse brought him a *Daily Cry*. There was a little paragraph about the nation-wide hunt, and more about him, with a larger photograph, and the words:

Reliable reports say that Inspector West was last seen on Monday evening, in the Guildford area. Anyone who saw him after six-fifteen that night should communicate at once with Scotland Yard or the nearest police-station.

* * * *

That was placed close to the murder story; so, slowly and reluctantly, the Yard was allowing him to be connected with that affair.

He put the paper down as the door opened. Kennedy came in with a little sparrow of a man. The newcomer had a beak of a nose and beady eyes, a fresh complexion and tiny, bloodless lips. He stood hardly higher than Kennedy's shoulder, but was immaculately dressed in black coat and striped grey trousers, pale spats, a diamond tiepin in a silvery grey tie. His voice was high pitched, almost shrill.

"Good morning, good morning. So you're the patient."

"For what?" asked Roger.

"You'll see," said Kennedy.

"Yes, yes," said the little man. "Yes, I see. Mr.—ah King, go over to the window, please, sit sideways to it, and look at the wall. Please."

Roger obeyed.

The little man came closer, peered, breathed on him, and kept nodding. It went on for an age. Then the man pinched his cheeks, his forehead, and the flesh beneath his chin. Roger felt like a biological specimen.

“Yes, yes, that will do.”

“A good subject?” asked Kennedy.

“Quite satisfactory.”

“Mind it is, damn you!”

“There is no need to be abusive,” said the sparrow perkily. “When?”

“This morning.”

“Very well, I will get ready.” The sparrow went out, bustling and confident.

Roger felt the glittering eyes on him; he felt hot and frightened, but schooled his voice to calmness.

“What’s on?”

“The second stage in the transformation of Roger West. You don’t need to worry, you won’t feel anything.” Kennedy laughed, and then Marion came in with a tray on which were two cups of coffee; a departure from daily practice and therefore suspicious. She spoke, as if to lull his suspicions.

“As you were here, Mr. Kennedy, I thought I would bring two cups.”

“That’ll do.”

“Thank you.”

“Drink coffee. West?”

“I prefer tea.”

“You’ll like this for a change.”

He drank it.

* * * *

It was drugged. He knew that from Kennedy’s grin, and had proof in his own drowsiness, ten minutes after he’d had the drink. Kennedy left him and the male nurse came in, said: “Follow me” and went out again, expecting unquestioning obedience. Roger followed him along the narrow, plain-walled passages. The nurse opened a door. A powerful smell of antiseptics stung Roger’s

nostrils; the bleak white austerity of an operation theatre met him. Panic rose inside him like a tempest, he stopped and gripped the door.

His mind was numbed with the drug, or he might have drawn back then, and fought to escape.

Beneath a single bright light was a chair; a barber's chair. It stood beyond the operating-table. The nurse led him to it, and said: "Coat off." He took off his coat and the nurse pushed him into the chair. As he sat down, the sparrow came hopping in. He went straight to a steaming metal pan, where surgical instruments gleamed through steam. Roger closed his eyes and leaned back against the chair; the neck rest was of hard rubber, quite comfortable. The mist rising from the pan seemed to become thicker, a billowing cloud, hiding the window, turning the light to an iridescent haze. The sparrow loomed out of it, or else was enveloped and almost invisible. He kept clicking his tongue; or was it his false teeth? He put on a long white coat. The mist looked like ectoplasm, and the sparrow a wraith. Roger's head whirred as if the cine-projector were inside it. The speed increased, the harsh sound grated in his ears, eyes, the whole of his head. The mist became a billowing cloud stirred up by a strong wind. Men became shapes. On a tray in front of him instruments gleamed— glittered—it was as if Kennedy were staring at him from the tray.

He lost consciousness.

* * * *

He groaned. Someone spoke, softly, soothingly. He groaned again, but not from pain. There was no pain, only fear of something he could not comprehend.

A hand was at his shoulder, and the voice came again.

He tried to open his eyes.

He could not.

Panic, a hundred times worse than when he had been in the

chair, took hold of him and shook him violently, his whole body seemed to be in physical turmoil. He felt pressure on his hands and —worse—on his eyes; that was why he couldn't open them, something pressed firmly against the lids. That wasn't all; there was pressure against his cheeks, chin, lips, and throat, a constricting pressure, as if his face were in a special "strait jacket".

"Mr. West!"

He knew that voice.

"Please don't struggle, please don't."

Was he struggling? He felt as if he were convulsed by forces stronger than himself. But he became calmer and more conscious of the gentle pressure of Marion's hands.

"You'll be all right," she promised, "you'll be all right."

He was still; and he was hot; prickly heat affected his whole body, and there was a warm glow over his face. He tried to speak, and couldn't move his lips.

"Don't try to speak yet. You'll be all right. You've had an operation on your face."

He lay quite still, aware of the stiff warmth of his face, clearly understanding what had happened. The sparrow was a plastic surgeon; Kennedy had talked of the second stage in the transformation of Roger West—a transformation in his looks, of course.

He moved his right hand.

He felt the same warm stiffness at the tips of his fingers —so they'd taken the skin off them, and grafted new, to prevent identification through his finger-prints. But the prints would grow again; didn't they know that?

"I'm going to help you to sit up," said Marion. "Then I'll feed you."

Her arms were young and strong, and soon he reclined comfortably against the pillow. She put something to his lips and it

seemed hard, cold, and round; like a cigarette. It was a rubber tube. Warm sweetness filled his mouth and he gurgled as it ran down his gullet.

"Are you fairly comfortable? Just nod."

He nodded.

"Is there anything you want?"

He wanted freedom; Janet; the boys; all the things which were impossible to have. He shook his head.

"I'll come and see you again, soon."

He wanted to ask how long this would go on, but he couldn't move his lips, and so had to let her go.

An hour or an age passed before she was back.

* * * *

"Mr. West, I want you to listen carefully to all I have to say."

He nodded.

"You can talk now, if you try. Your lips are free of the bandages, but your chin and nose aren't. If you try to talk without moving your lips much, you'll manage."

Old lags knew that trick; he'd often demonstrated for fun, and sent the boys off into peals of laughter. He tried now.

"Okay. I can hear." The voice didn't sound like his own.

Had they changed that?

"You'll be here just for a day or two, and after that more of the bandages will be taken away and you'll feel easier."

"Okay."

"There's a cord above your head. Pull it if you want someone to come."

"Thanks."

"Would you like the radio?"

"No!"

"If you would, just pull the cord. And please remember this. I want to do everything I can to help. I know who you are now, I've

seen the newspapers, and——”

She broke off in a choking voice, and he heard her rush out of the room.

* * * *

Routine.

Special feeding, liquids only; visits once a day from the sparrow. Radio music in half-hour doses. After the third day, some of the bandages were removed. The burning sensation went completely, but his face and fingers felt numb.

Routine: practise speaking; practise moving his fingers. Radio music; dull radio comedians, bright radio comediennes—no news. Never any news.

Routine: look forward to Marion’s visits. Wait for them. Hear a faint sound and hope she had entered. Feel sick with disappointment if she hadn’t, exhilarated if she had. Routine: stop thinking about Janet. Stop it, stop it! Stop an avalanche, stop the waves, stop thinking about Janet and about the boys.

Each day for seven days a little more of the bandage was removed.

On the eighth day, the awful darkness lifted, for the bandages and pads were removed from his eyes. He opened them to a subdued light, and the hazy face of the sparrow in front of him—a perky, peering sparrow, who seemed fully satisfied with the results.

“Two or three days now, and you’ll be all right, quite all right; perfectly satisfactory case. No complications. You’ll be weak, but you’ll get strong quickly.”

Routine: *wait.*

CHAPTER X

NEW MAN

RAIN hissed and spattered against the windows, heavy grey clouds hung low, and the garden was a sorry drenched mass. Many of the daffodils were dead or dying, and there was little colour in the borders, except green.

Roger stood there, looking out.

The door opened. Marion ? His heart leapt, because hers was the only friendly voice and friendly face. But this was the sparrow, and Kennedy was with him. Kennedy nodded and smiled, as if in an affable mood.

“Good morning!” The sparrow rubbed his hands together briskly. “Feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good. Come and sit down.”

Roger sat in a chair in front of the mirror. The pale white bandages covered most of his face, and he had become familiar with the “new” eyes, nose, and mouth since seeing them three days ago. They made him different.

Kennedy stood behind him, looking at his reflection in the mirror.

“Now!” chirrupped the sparrow.

Bright scissors snipped the bandages at the back of Roger’s head, nimble but gentle fingers plucked the gauzy stuff away, and it peeled off, almost like a skin. There were several layers. Roger gripped the arms of his chair and deliberately closed his eyes. The sparrow said: “There!” After that there was silence, until Kennedy spoke in a marvelling voice.

“Wonderful!”

“Yes, yes, it’s good. I knew you’d be satisfied.”

Kennedy sneered: “Aren’t you going to look at yourself, West?”

Roger clenched his teeth, and his fingers seemed stuck to the arms of his chair. He could imagine the delight in the sparrow’s eyes and the gloating satisfaction in Kennedy’s. Very slowly, he opened his eyes. The vague shape of his head and shoulders appeared first, and he stared as through a mist. That cleared.

He looked into the face of a stranger.

It wasn’t a bad face; not evil. His good looks had turned into ruggedness. His nose was broader at the bridge, his eyes were narrower—he knew that skin had been taken out of the corners. His chin jutted, and seemed less pointed. His lips were thinner, but not turned down at the corners. As a face there wasn’t much the matter with it, but it wasn’t his. His usually long and wavy fair hair was cut very short, showing the shape of his head.

* * * *

After the others had gone, Marion came in. She saw him sitting by the window, gazing out on to the rainswept garden and a prospect as desolate as his own future. She came slowly and softly, as if afraid of what she was going to see. He wouldn’t turn his head, made her come round in front of him. She put her hands to her breast and opened her mouth as if to cry out, but no sound came.

Roger growled: “Satisfied with your share in it?” It was hard to say why he felt that he had to be harsh with her.

“I’ve tried to help.” She was near tears.

“And this is the result.”

“If only you’d let me send for others——”

“Let you! Did I stop you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I didn’t tell the police because I thought you were afraid of them. I wanted to help you. I’d give my life to help you. I didn’t care—I don’t care—whether you killed her or not.”

“I didn’t.”

"Then why didn't you let me——"

"Oh, forget it." He stood up abruptly. "All right, Marion. Tell me how it is you've been nursing me since you stopped thinking I was mad. You know that your precious Dr. Ritter and my dear friend Mr. Kennedy are crooks, don't you?"

"I—yes."

"You knew all the time—didn't you?"

"No," she said dully. "I'd no idea there was anything wrong when you first came. After I'd looked after you. Dr. Ritter told me that you'd killed that girl and had to be—changed. He gave me the chance of helping you. I took it. I had to take it. I think he knew why."

"Why?"

"I love you," she said.

* * * *

Was she lying ?

* * * *

Or was she trying this way to win his confidence? Was she a tool of Kennedy's, or simply a victim?

Kennedy was in the lounge downstairs when Roger went in. He put down a newspaper and raised a hand.

"Hallo, West. Are you as well as you look?"

"I'm all right."

"Good. After a spell like you've had, you want to get back into civilization slowly. I'm going to let you take Marion around a bit. You'll both be closely watched, but I don't think you'll try any funny stuff."

"I'm tired of doing nothing."

"I've plenty of work for you—when I'm ready. For a start, here are the newspapers for the past ten days. Get yourself up to date with the news. Then you can take Marion to the flicks. Dance around a bit, afterwards, start living."

He went out.

Roger read newspapers until he could take in nothing more.

The Copse Cottage murder had gradually faded from the *Daily Cry*, and the story of his disappearance replaced it. The disappearance of Roger West was—or had been, it was deep in the past already—a nine-days wonder. But there had been no official connection between that and the murder, all the statements were guarded. Only one thing hurt: a photograph of Janet. An obsession began to take hold of him: he must get word to his wife. If she received even a hint that he was alive, then he could rely on her faith to help her over the agony she was suffering now.

Marion? Could he trust her?

* * * *

A weak sun pierced the clouds, birds chattered, the air was fresh, crisp, exhilarating. Roger, dressed in well-made new clothes, stood beside Marion, by a small car, outside the front of the house. Beyond were dripping trees and hedges, and great fields, where a few cattle grazed. He could see no other sign of habitation.

"Get in," he said.

Marion climbed in.

She wore a red plastic raincoat over a blue dress. Her eyes sparkled, her freshness seemed to match the day, fears were gone, and she was set fair for enjoyment: being with him. They settled down, and their chauffeur, the male nurse, let in the clutch. This winding road led for miles between trees, and then they came upon a main road. There were telegraph poles, wires, cars, lorries, the half-forgotten things. They passed through a village where a constable stood leaning on his bicycle, talking to two old men.

They came to a town.

It was bustling and pleasant, had a friendly atmosphere. The streets and wide market-place were thronged with people, cars, single-decker buses, a few horses and traps. The nurse took them to

a car park, near a huge Odeon Cinema.

"Do you want to see a film at once?" he asked Marion

"We're to go to tea at the Royal, first."

He was mingling with ordinary people again, and felt numbed with the strangeness. There were several policemen here; none showed any interest in him, yet each would have scored a rousing triumph had he guessed.

Marion held tightly on to his arm.

No one appeared to follow them, but he was sure that they were being watched wherever they went; that sixth sense which came from years of experience hadn't died. They came upon a large hotel, where a sign outside read : Tea Dance, Daily, 3s. 6d.

"Where are we?" Roger asked.

"Worcester."

He recalled it, now. The old town cheek by jowl with the new. They went in. The atmosphere was friendly, a good band was playing, but only three couples were dancing, half a dozen others sitting round a large room. The waiter came up promptly.

They danced; Marion was as light as a feather.

"If we could go on like this," she said.

He nodded, but made no comment. Her presence hurt because she reminded him of Janet in her complete contentment at being with him. He danced mechanically a quick-step with a gay lilt and quickening rhythm.

Then he saw a couple enter; and he froze.

Marion said: "Don't look like that!" He turned away, but looked at the new-comers out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't fancy. His blood ran hot, he missed a step again. Marion asked urgently:

"What is it?"

He didn't answer, but led her towards their table, feeling physically sick and racked with pain. The new-comers looked

around—man and woman.

Man—and *JANET*.

* * * *

The man was Mark Lessing, Roger's one close friend.

* * * *

"What is it?" demanded Marion. "Please tell me."

"Never mind."

"Have you seen someone you know?"

"Yes. Please don't talk."

She fell into a reluctant silence. Janet took off her coat, the now shabby black sealskin which he had bought her years ago. Mark put it over the back of her chair, Janet was sideways towards Roger, not five yards away. She began to look round her, and he hated what he saw in her grey-green eyes. She was older—careworn and tense. Her hands were clenched in her lap. Her eyes sought out every man here, and Roger knew she was looking for him. She'd come here, hoping to see him, but the hope was already dying. She looked at him, but her gaze didn't linger for a moment; she showed no interest in Marion.

Her eyes were so tired, her hair, dark yet usually so full of light, had lost its lustre. Mark Lessing gave her a cigarette, and she began to smoke nervously, agitatedly.

Mark sat back, looking about him with less obvious tension than Janet, but eagerly, searchingly. He was good-looking—in his way, handsome. His expression was austere, and those who did not know him well took him for a snob. His skin was rather sallow, his dark hair was wavy, and worn too long; it looked affected.

No two people knew Roger so well.

"Please tell me," Marion whispered.

"A friend—of mine."

"Oh. Kennedy——"

"Sent us here. This is a test of my nerves and goodwill. I'd

rather not talk."

"It's your wife isn't it?" Marion said in a flat voice.

Roger nodded.

"She's——"

"Don't."

"She's very sweet."

"Let's get out of here!"

"No! Kennedy's watching." Marion feared Kennedy so much.

Kennedy was grinning, as if to himself.

"Come on," said Roger.

He led the way, and Kennedy still grinned. Mark glanced at him; was there a puzzled gleam in his eyes? Roger paid at the cash desk, and when he looked round, neither of the others was looking at him. He was sticky hot. He went into the lobby and saw a man sitting in an easy-chair, from which he could see into the ballroom. It was all Roger could do to look away from the watcher who was Detective Inspector Sloan of New Scotland Yard —and no man at the Yard knew Roger more intimately.

Sloan stared at him blankly.

* * * *

The film didn't matter; all he saw was Janet. It was dark when they left. The male nurse was outside with the car. The journey to the nursing-home took an hour. He wanted to get to his room and be on his own, but Kennedy called him into the lounge. Marion made to follow.

"Not you," Kennedy said. "Close the door and leave us alone."

Marion obeyed.

Kennedy grinned. "Good, isn't it, West?"

"Is it?"

"I'd call it good. In future, you're to be known as Rayner—Charles Rayner. I've a passport, registration card, business, home, past history, and everything else you might need. Don't forget, Mr.

Rayner."

"You forget my bad memory."

"Your memory is all right, so far, but it won't hurt for long. Marion's a nice girl, and she's yours for the asking. Oh—*Rayner."*

"Well?"

"You might have the bright notion of sending word to your wife. Don't. I sent her a message, saying she might see you in Worcester to-day. So she hasn't given up hope. I knew she was on the way, when you left. Know how I knew?"

Roger didn't answer.

Kennedy laughed.

"Your wife has a new maid. She's spent so much time away on wild-goose chases after you that she had to have a reliable nurse for the boys. She's got one. That nurse will be loyal to her for exactly as long as you're loyal to me. Not a day longer. You're no fool, West. If your wife got a message which convinced her you're alive, she'd tell the nurse—or at least, give it away. Remember all this. The nurse is a nice girl, and fond of children. But she'll do what I tell her. I don't want to have to hurt the kids."

* * * *

Roger left the house again a week after he had seen Janet.

London!

Fresh under an April sun, but with her great buildings dark with smoke and grime. London, a seething, toiling mass of people, crowded streets, giant red buses, box-like taxis, shops, shops, shops —and factories, docks, the broad, smooth Thames. The London he knew and loved, revealed to him again as he was driven along the straight, wide tawdriness of Oxford Street, into Regent Street with its curving stateliness. Piccadilly bustle, Leicester Square a quiet, friendly grass patch with gargantuan cinemas around it, Trafalgar Square, Whitehall, massive Government buildings and—Scotland Yard. The driver turned towards Scotland Yard, but didn't go past

the gates. He stopped the car so that Roger could see the reddish brick of the old building, housing the civil police. Constables on duty looked at them disinterestedly, as at all sightseers. They drove past Cannon Row Police Station, dark, low-roofed, and dingy, with its barred windows. He knew every inch of it—and of the Yard. It had been his life.

The Embankment; the white new building, housing the C.I.D. Then they drove off the cluttered road near the pale-grey austerity of the new Waterloo Bridge, and into the Strand.

Roger, by the driver's side, hadn't said a word since they had reached London. Now :

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

They turned out of the Strand, near Covent Garden, empty and desolate and waiting for the next day's business. They stopped in a narrow street. Here the buildings were old—a mixture of flats and offices.

"This is you," said the driver. "Number 15."

Roger got out. Number 15 was opposite—with an open door, a dark hallway, and narrow stairs. He went in, completely mystified. The driver sat in the car and grinned at his back. He glanced at the notice-board: there were six names, and one newly painted sign read:

Charles Rayner.

Commission Agent.

Wholesale—Retail.

4th Floor.

There was no lift. He walked upstairs slowly. He was Charles Rayner, and this was where he would work, do what "business" he would. It was dark on each landing; darkest on the fourth where a broken window was boarded up. He stood undecidedly outside a door marked with his new name; took the plunge and opened it.

A man leapt at him from the corner behind the door.

CHAPTER XI

GINGER

WILD eyes burned in a pale face. An iron rod clenched in a claw-like hand brushed Roger's shoulders as he swung to one side. The rod hit the door with a metallic clang, and clattered on the floor. Roger ducked and dodged, then went into the attack, striking out savagely.

Right to the stomach; left to the chin. The first blow brought forth a soughing groan, the second, a screech. The man backed away helplessly, banged against a chair and sprawled into it.

Roger closed the door, and listened intently. He could hear a typewriter, going at speed; that was distant, the only audible sound. The man in the chair sat up, licked his lips and put out a hand as if afraid of further violence.

"Can you give me one reason why I shouldn't break your neck?" Roger growled. His voice was hard and grating, the voice he'd trained himself to acquire.

The man cowered back; hardly a hero. He wasn't difficult to read. He had screwed himself up to make that assault, and when it had failed, courage went out of him like air from a punctured balloon.

He was thin, his pallor sickly. He needed a shave, and his gingery hair wanted cutting. His clothes were poor; navy-blue suit frayed at the cuffs, and a choker-scarf, not a collar and tie.

This was a waiting-room; the high, cream-washed walls were bare, and there were two leather arm-chairs and four good uprights, reproduction Hepplewhite. On a plain walnut table, a dozen new magazines were neatly placed; alongside it was a similar arrangement of trade periodicals. There was a faint smell, dry and not unpleasant, of distemper. Two doors led from here. One was

marked: Inquiries: Please Ring, with a sign beneath a bell-push; the other, *Charles Rayner, Private.* There were frosted-glass panels in each.

"Why did you attack me?" Roger demanded, roughly.

"I—thought——" The man hesitated, thrusting out his hands appealingly. "You're not the man I expected."

"It would still have been murder."

"I came to kill him."

You couldn't mistake the touch of dignity which came unexpectedly with the words; the man was proud of what he had come to do.

Roger said: "Stay there." He turned, pushed open the inquiries door and saw a large office, with six or seven desks, three typewriters, several telephones, cabinets—a well-equipped place, where everything was new. There was a large cupboard, with hooks for hats and coats. He went back, gripped the ginger-haired man and took him into the room and locked him in the cupboard.

Another door led from this room—to the "Private" one. Roger opened it; the office beyond was sumptuous; more study than office, with a thick carpet, panelled walls, a library of books, and several easy-chairs. No one was here. He studied the ceiling and the panelled walls; a policeman again, knowing exactly what he wanted and knowing pretty well where to find it. He saw a small panel, one of several in the wall behind the desk, and prised it open with his fingers.

He grinned broadly; that was his first natural smile since he had left Scotland Yard.

Inside a foot-deep cavity was a tiny dictaphone recording outfit. He switched it off, using a pencil, and closed the panel. Then he scanned the ceiling and panelling again until he was sure there was no peephole through which he could be watched or heard. He went to the outer room. The ginger-haired man stepped meekly out

of the cupboard.

"In here," Roger said.

He locked the outer door with the key on the inside; there was no way of getting in except by the windows. These overlooked a blank wall, and the drop to the area below was sheer. He stood first at one side, then the other, to make sure that the office could not be overlooked. Finally, with the ginger-haired man gaping and nervous, he stood on a corner of the desk and examined the ceiling; no, there was no break to mar the white paper; no peephole through which he could be watched.

"Who did you expect to find?"

"Not—not you."

"I've believed you, so far. Who did you want to kill?"

"Rayner," said the ginger-haired man.

So he had inherited an enemy as well as a name.

"Why?"

"He killed my wife."

"Murderers get hanged."

"It wasn't known as murder," the ginger-haired man said wearily. "It just wasn't discovered, but I knew. I was inside when it happened. He always told me he'd kill her if she wouldn't do what he wanted. She didn't, and he killed her."

Was this another of Kennedy's little tricks?

"I'm—Kyle," the man muttered.

"Why did they put you inside?" Kyle, Kyle? The name was familiar, and rang a bell in his memory.

"Forgery," Kyle said simply. "I'm an engraver. I'm a good engraver." That incongruous hint of dignity came again. "My products were practically undetectable."

That was true: yes, Kyle. He'd been caught and tried in Manchester. It was one of those cases in which a provincial force had stolen a march on the Yard. Eddie Day, purveyor of faked

messages, had gone to Manchester to hold a watching brief for the Yard, and had come back shaken by the cleverness of the forgeries.

"When did you come out?"

"A month ago."

"What have you been doing since?"

"Looking for Rayner."

"Are you still on your ticket?"

"Yes, I report twice a week. I go to Bow Street while I'm in London."

"What does this man, who calls himself Rayner, look like?"

The watery pale-blue eyes, with their pink lids and thin fair lashes, looked puzzled.

"Don't you know?"

"I am Rayner."

"No, no! You can't be! You——"

"The other man used my name. What's he like? What's his most noticeable feature?"

Kyle said softly and in a voice which seemed to be filled with hatred:

"You would never forget Rayner. His eyes—how I hated his eyes. Denise did, too, although they fascinated her, she—she was attracted to him, but he frightened her. He wanted her to go with him and leave me. My pals told me that Rayner told her he would kill her if she didn't go to him. She didn't go. She was killed in—in an accident. Accident!" Shrillness put an edge to his voice, and his eyes blazed. "She was run down by a car, all her beauty spoiled. All her beauty." He took a photograph from his pocket, and his fingers trembled. He stared down at it, and tears glistened in his eyes. He whispered: "Look!"

She was gay and smiling, a queen to this man's slave. It was easy to believe that Kyle had worshipped her.

Roger said: "I can understand why you don't like Rayner. Let

me have a look at your wallet."

"I—no!"

"Come on."

Kyle handed it over, reluctantly. Roger shook the contents of the wallet on to the brown-leather surface of the desk. He saw the expected oddments: a ticket of leave, prison-discharge form, registration card—an old, tattered, dog-eared letter dated eight years ago, a ten-shilling note, and another photograph. He turned the photograph over. He knew that Kyle was watching him, jealously intent, and kept his face set.

It wasn't easy, for this was the girl from Paris—Lucille.

He stared down at it, then at the picture of Kyle's dead wife.

These were alike, with unmistakable family likeness.

* * * *

"You pick good lookers," Roger growled, after a long pause.

"Please!" Kyle's dignity rose again. "That is my daughter."

"Sure?"

"I am quite sure," said Kyle. "That is Lucille." He gave a gentle smile. "Years ago, I sent her to France, to my wife's family. I met Denise during the first Great War. Lucille was so good and clever, and I did not want her smeared with my reputation. My wife and I agreed it was best. We had anxious days during the last war, my wife suffered most, because I wasn't there to help her bear her loneliness, but all was well, Lucille was in a country-district, no harm befell her." The pedantic phrases had a touch of dreaminess.

"Lucky Lucille," Roger's voice seemed to stick in his throat. "Where does she live now?"

"In Paris."

"What's her address?"

"That I shall not tell you."

"Let me have that address. Kyle. You'll regret it if you don't. Afterwards, you can clear out of here. I'll stake you for a few

weeks." Roger took out his wallet, and counted ten one-pound notes; Kennedy had given him fifty.

Eagerness but not avarice gleamed in Kyle's eyes.

"I'll stake you for ten a month," Roger said. "I'll send them to your address."

"No! No, that wouldn't be safe, I'm at Joe's." Joe's was a verminous den, a doss-house that remained a blot on London, as it had been in the dark, squalid London back streets of Victorian days. "Send it to—but why are you going to stake me?"

"I don't like men who use my name. You'll keep quiet. If anyone asks, you came here to beg, and I kicked you out."

"Yes, yes!"

"Where's Lucille?" In a lonely pauper's grave, somewhere in Surrey, a nameless corpse.

"She is at 23 Rue de Croix, Paris 8." The information came out slowly and reluctantly; but it came. "You won't harm her?"

"No. I'll post ten bars a month to you in the name of John Pearson at the Strand Post Office—Trafalgar Square end. Now clear out. If anyone worries you, telephone me here." Using block capitals, he wrote the number, taken from the telephone, on a strip of paper, printed the name of John Pearson, c/o the Strand G.P.O., as a reminder, and pushed it across the desk. "Don't write, don't come again unless I send for you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, but—I don't understand."

"You don't have to." Roger stood up. "Pull your hat over your eyes when you go out, don't let anyone get a good look at you. You might be in trouble if your friend knows you've been after him."

Kyle nodded. For years, in prison, he had done what he was told, the habit of obedience was strong in him.

Roger went into the outer office with him, watched him pick up his cap and go out, small, spindly, nervous. Roger followed him down the creaky narrow stairs, a few steps behind him.

Ginger Kyle slipped away towards the market.

Another man came along the street, walking briskly.

Detective Inspector Sloan of the Yard, tall, blond, with an alert, eager face, good blue eyes and powerful body and shoulders, watched Kyle keenly.

Roger, his heart hammering, went upstairs. At the second-floor landing, he paused.

Sloan was coming in from the street.

CHAPTER XII

TEST

ROGER opened the dictaphone panel, switched the machine on, then sat at his desk. He opened a drawer, took out some papers—the first that came to hand—and spread them out. Sloan's footsteps sounded on the landing. Roger heard the outer door open.

Kennedy was a fool not to have primed him. But was he? This had all the signs of a trap; the empty office, and Sloan's visit. Would Kennedy have let him stay here alone without a purpose?

No.

Sloan's footsteps were firm, not heavy: Roger knew them well, they had worked on a hundred cases together.

Sloan tapped.

Roger wiped his forehead, and called: "Come in."

Sloan thrust the door open firmly and took a good look round the office before coming in and closing the door. He looked hard at Roger, as at a man he was seeing for the first time. To Roger, it was a moment of screaming tension, but—Sloan did not recognize him.

Roger said: "Well?"

"Mr. Rayner? Charles Rayner?"

"Yes."

"Sorry to worry you, Mr. Rayner." That was perfunctory, Roger couldn't mistake Sloan's hostility, as he pulled up a chair and sat down. He took out his cigarettes, in a familiar yellow packet.

"Smoke?"

"No. Who are you?"

Sloan lit up and took out a card and held it forward. Roger glanced at it.

"You may be a policeman, but you don't own the world."

"I just help to keep it clean," said Sloan. "You had a visitor

just now. A certain Mr. Kyle, who spent a lot of time behind bars."

"So he told me." The dictaphone picked that up, so Kennedy would learn about Kyle's visit.

"What did he want?"

"Work."

"Did you give him any?"

"No."

"Why did you see him off?"

"To make sure he left the premises."

"So you've got all the answers, Mr. Rayner."

"That's right."

"I hope you've some more answers up your sleeve, Mr. Rayner." Sloan was heavily sarcastic. "This is an informal call. Can I take it that you'd swear in court that you'd never seen Kyle before?"

"Yes."

"What business do you transact, Mr. Rayner?"

"I'm a commission agent."

"That covers a lot of—things." The pause made the words an accusation. "How long have you been in business here?"

"I haven't."

That startled Sloan. "This is your office."

"I open here next week."

"Did you have another office, before this, or have you just started in business, Mr. Rayner?"

"You've a lot of men to help you find out things like that."

"A peculiar attitude to adopt, Mr. Rayner."

"If there's anything peculiar here, it's your manner."

"I see." Sloan read the obvious into that—the obvious that wasn't true, and which made Kennedy's failure to give a briefing almost a tragedy. "So you don't intend to help the police, Mr. Rayner."

"When I know how I can help, I will."

“Is this a new business?”

“How will the answer help you?”

Sloan said: “People who are awkward with the police often regret it. Don’t forget that.”

“Policemen who come on their own aren’t entitled to all the answers.”

“So you’re clever, too. Where do you live?”

“This is my address.”

“Morning, noon, and night?”

Roger said slowly, heavily: “Inspector, I don’t like your manner. I don’t know the man who came here just now. Don’t blame me if he’s a crook. I’m not. Next time you want information, don’t start by accusing me of being a liar. Now I’ve work to do.”

“Who for?” asked Sloan. “Kennedy?”

* * * *

It was like looking at the world from the moon; he knew what lay behind every word, was familiar with every inflection of Sloan’s voice. He’d had a split second of warning that a bombshell was coming. He hadn’t known what, and the “Kennedy” came out with shattering effect, but he kept a poker face.

“Who’s Kennedy?” he asked, blankly.

“So you don’t know?”

“No.”

“You’re making a mistake, Mr. Rayner.”

“Try making one yourself,” Roger said.

“You insist that you don’t know Kennedy?”

“Tell me which Kennedy and why you want to know, and I’ll tell you—if I like your reasons.”

It was fascinating to sit and watch, to guess—to know— the thought passing through Sloan’s mind. They stared each other out, and then Sloan’s eyes went dull, which meant he was going all the way.

"You are Kennedy," he said. "Let's have the truth."

He was Roger West, alias Charles Rayner.

Kyle knew Kennedy as Rayner.

Sloan had guessed that Kennedy and Rayner were one and the same person; and Sloan wouldn't make a wild guess, he had reason for thinking that.

* * * *

"You can't keep facts from the police for long," Sloan said, but he knew that his challenge had failed.

"I can't stop the police making fools of themselves. I'm Charles Rayner. I'm in honest business, and I've a lot of work to do." Roger stood up, but Sloan stayed in his chair, looking puzzled. Why?

Sloan said: "You'll regret your attitude, Mr. Rayner."

He got up and went out. Roger waited until the outer door closed, and heard a faint sound in the outer office. He saw the handle of the door turn, but Sloan didn't come in, just left the door ajar and stood listening—an old trick, almost all tricks were old. Roger picked up the telephone and banged the cradle up and down, making the bell ring faintly. Sloan would feel himself to be on the verge of a triumph, expecting him to telephone an accomplice, ears strained for every word. Another temptation came; call the Yard, ask whether they had a Chief Inspector Sloan. This time, he succumbed. He dialled, and could imagine Sloan's eyes bulging. A calm, familiar voice answered him, and the flood-gates of temptation opened wide again.

He had been a fool to do this.

"Scotland Yard, can I help you? . . . Can I help you?" As he didn't answer at once, the man at the exchange spoke more sharply.

"Er—yes. Can you tell me whether you have an officer named Sloan—Chief Inspector Sloan?"

"We have Detective Inspector Sloan, sir."

"Is he a tall, fresh-faced——"

"Who is that speaking, please?"

"My name is—oh, never mind." He put back the receiver.

Here he was, at the end of a telephone which could connect him with the past which was to be drummed out of his mind. Lift the instrument and dial a familiar number, and Janet would answer. Janet—what would she do if she heard his voice?

Forget that! He could call Mark Lessing; a dozen, a hundred friends. Forget it!

He pushed the telephone away and lit a cigarette. His hand was unsteady, he had never felt more in need of a drink. He opened a cupboard in the big desk, and felt no surprise at sight of a whisky bottle, a set of glasses, and a soda syphon. He poured himself out a drink.

This was a pretty good start; whisky in the middle of the afternoon. And it wasn't the only good start; plunged into an unfamiliar office, with no information, no knowledge even about himself as he was supposed to be; murderously attacked in mistake for Kennedy; accused of being Kennedy. Where was Kennedy? How much of Kyle's story had been genuine? He pictured Kyle's wife being crushed beneath a car; and Lucille, lying dead.

He began to go through the papers in the desk; routine, everything was routine. There were account books, order books, files of letters from customers, details of the business he handled; it could hardly be more varied. He lost himself in the task of studying it all. Charles Rayner had a flourishing business, and dealt in practically anything from tobacco and cigarettes to wines and spirits, tubular-steel chairs to plastic goods, bric-a-brac manufactured in Birmingham for sale in the bazaars of India and China—he had an export business as well as that at home, but apparently imported nothing. The business had been conducted from offices in Leadenhall Street; there were "change of address" cards which had been sent out to all customers; he was plunged into

an established business, and much was explained by a stencilled circular letter:

Mr Samuel Wiseman begs to inform you that he has disposed of his business to Mr. Charles Rayner, and will remain with the firm for a short while in an advisory capacity. He takes pleasure in assuring you that Mr. Rayner will have personal charge of the business, and you may be, assured of his close attention to your special requirements at all times.

This letter was dated 1st March: two weeks before Lucille's death. Had Kennedy been so sure of himself that he had planned that far ahead, or had he had another man in mind for "Charles Rayner" and thrust Roger into the position at the last moment? What were his real plans?

In a drawer of the desk, Roger found "his" passport; he leaned back as he glanced through it. As a Yard man, he knew that it was comparatively easy to obtain false passports, but this was a prime example; it had been used, had visa and customs stamps for the United States, several European countries, even Germany; and his photograph was unmistakable. He hadn't even realized that he'd had one taken in his new personality, but here it was—a good likeness as passport photographs went. He hadn't discovered any foreign correspondence; there must be some in one of the cabinets; if he worked hard he would find out where he had been.

The telephone bell rang.

Kennedy ?

Roger took the instrument off its cradle, hesitated, then put it to his ear. He schooled his voice, spoke with little movement of his lips.

"Hallo."

"Roger!" His heart leapt at the name, for this was a woman. "Roger, please help me, I ——"

This was Marion—Marion, in trouble.

"What's the matter?"

"I can't tell you here, I must see you. I'll be at Piccadilly, by Swan and Edgar's in an hour. Please help me."

"Marion, listen. I——"

But she'd gone.

* * * *

Roger stood outside Swan and Edgar's, hub of London, watched the traffic and jingled the office keys in his pocket. He hardly noticed people, but every policeman in sight seemed to be twice life size.

Marion was a quarter of an hour late.

Half an hour——

It was no use waiting, she hadn't been able to come.

He had grown fond of Marion, as one could grow fond of the only really friendly soul in one's life. He had once had the opportunity to use her to help himself, and had missed it because he hadn't trusted her.

Had it been a mistake to come here? And a mistake to talk to Kyle, a mistake to——

The male nurse appeared, short, flashily dressed in a loud blue suit and bright brown shoes and a spotted red-and-white bow tie. He strutted.

"Getting tired?" he asked.

"What do you want?"

"You, Mister Rayner. You're wanted at the office. If I was you, I wouldn't come away so easy in future." He held up his arm, and a passing taxi stopped. "Inside."

Roger obeyed. The male nurse gave the office address.

"What's all this?" Roger demanded.

"You'll find out."

There were three traffic blocks; a ten-minute journey took them twenty minutes, and not another word was exchanged. The

male nurse waited for him to start up the stairs. He went towards the office door, and the man said;

"Other side—that's where you live." He tossed Roger a key. Roger opened the door opposite the office, and stepped into a well-furnished, bright, and colourful sitting-room.

A radio was on, and Kennedy sat with his legs stretched out and his eyes closed, a dreamy expression on his face, listening to Brahms. The male nurse closed the door and then went out of this room into another. Kennedy kept his eyes closed, but as the music stopped, he said:

"So you had a visit from Ginger Kyle, did you?"

His manner was overbearing, even threatening. Revolt had to start some time.

Roger chose now.

CHAPTER XIII

REVOLT

AS he stared at Roger, Kennedy kept his eyes closed, or nearly closed. Roger strode across the room and switched off the radio, took out his cigarette-case, and lit up.

"I spoke to you," said Kennedy, and opened his eyes wide; they burned as if at white heat.

"I heard you."

"Then answer me."

Roger said: "One of these days I'll break your neck. Are you congenitally crazy? You let me come here without a briefing, easy meat for anyone who happened along. Kyle doesn't matter, but Sloan does."

"What did you say to Kyle?"

"Just now I'm asking the questions. Why didn't you brief me properly? Or did you think I had a sixth sense? If I'd been able to tell Sloan all about the business, who I'd bought it from, what it was, he'd have gone away satisfied. Now he's after me. He's a bull-dog type. He'll keep at me until he's satisfied, and that probably won't be for a long time. I thought you were supposed to be good."

Throughout all this, Kennedy gradually sat up in his chair and drew in his legs. He didn't blink, didn't look away from Roger. The cigarette tasted unpleasant. He stood his ground, and Kennedy said softly:

"It was unavoidable." Kennedy stood up. He had submitted to the first squall of revolt, which was a minor triumph. "I also had a visit from the police at my office."

"So they're after us both."

"They've asked a few questions. You've got to find a way to stall them. That's your job—understand, Rayner? That's what you're

here for—countering the work of the police. You'd better do it well."

"You bungled this. I should have been briefed before I got here. Your funny-funny business will get you to the gallows if you're not careful."

"You'll come with me."

"That's why I'm worried about it."

Kennedy smiled slowly.

"That's a good frame of mind to be in," he said. "I think I chose the right man. But watch your step. I'm the boss."

"What I do, I'll do my own way." Roger went to a chair and sat down heavily—and flung out the next question: "What's happened to Marion?"

"Why should you worry ?"

"She called me, asked me to——"

"Sure, I know. But you don't answer appeals for help from pretty women, you go where I tell you to go, and forget all the rest."

"Where is she?"

Kennedy leaned back and thrust his legs out again.

"She isn't," he said softly.

The significance of it was a long time dawning on Roger. It might not have dawned when it did but for that slow, cruel smile. "She isn't." Marion wasn't alive, they'd killed her.

"She met with an accident," Kennedy said.

"Accident?" On the tip of his tongue were the words: "Like Kyle's wife," but he bit on them. "So you——"

"That's right. Haven't you realized who you're working for? Marion made it easier to handle you. But she wasn't reliable. She fell in love with you. She listened at keyholes and learned this address and enough of the truth to be dangerous. She was silly enough to threaten to tell the police all she knew."

Roger said: “Every detective in Scotland Yard could tell you what I’m going to tell you now. You’ve had it. You can get away with one murder, maybe two—but in your frame of mind, you go on until you get caught. You’re as good as hanged.”

“Very nice. I’ve been telling you, your job is to keep me free from the police.” Kennedy stood up and went to the window. This one overlooked the narrow street. “I don’t want to turn you into a yes man, you won’t be any good to me that way, but don’t forget who’s the boss, and don’t forget that if I get caught, you’ll be caught with me. I asked you what you said to Kyle.”

“How did you know about Sloan?”

“I’ll talk about a lot of things that mystify you, and you won’t say much I don’t get to hear. The question is—Kyle.”

“He was waiting when I got here. He expected to see someone else, although he didn’t say so. He pitched a hard-luck story, and I flung him out on his ear.”

“What kind of hard luck?”

“He wanted money. If I’d had time, I’d have listened to his story, but there wasn’t any time, because I wanted to be alone. I didn’t want anyone to find me with an old lag.”

“Who told you that Kyle was an old lag?”

Roger stared and laughed. He managed to sound amused. He lit another cigarette and waved his hand, as if at something which was ridiculous.

“I’ve been dealing with old lags most of my life. I’ve only to set eyes on them to know where they’ve been living. Kyle’s been inside for at least four years, you don’t get that way until you’ve had a stretch or longer.”

Kennedy said: “Okay, West. Keep on the level. Now, listen to me. This business is going to expand! You can leave all the details of staff and the daily running of the business to the secretary—Rose Morgan. You’ll get your instructions for the rest from me. You’ll

travel a lot— didn't I promise you an easy life?" He sneered. "This is your home address in England. There are two rooms and a kitchen besides this. You'll have a man to look after you named Harry. He'll be along later in the day. Just settle into your new life, Rayner."

"When are you going to tell me what it's all about?"

"You'll learn. I've told you enough for a start. Just remember what happens to people who won't play the game my way. The girl at Copse Cottage was one. Marion was another."

Kennedy got up and went out.

Roger sat quite still, looking at the ceiling. Images on his mind were far too many and too vivid; Marion was added to them, now— good, wholesome, attractive Marion, who had wanted to help him; had begged to help him. If he'd trusted her, he might have avoided all this, or much of it. The ruthless devilry of it swept over him like a stinking cloak of corruption.

Rose Morgan was forty-ish; plump, shapeless, dressed in a kind of black sack. She had a little beak of a nose, small pale lips which opened very little, a high-pitched, decisive voice. She was efficiency to the last syllable. Her hair was mousy colour and fastened in a bun at the back. She had good hands and perfectly kept nails. She seemed willing to teach Roger everything there was to know about the business.

He saw her for the first time the day after Sloan's visit— a Friday. The staff was coming here on Monday, she said.

He asked for a list of the staff of nine; she assured him that all of them were thoroughly reliable and had worked for Wiseman, the previous owner, for several years. He examined the salary list; it was high—he paid his staff well! Rose Morgan received a thousand pounds a year, and the annual wages bill came to a little over five thousand. Rent, rates, other general expenses, were as much again. Before the business paid a penny profit, it had to show income over

expenditure of ten thousand pounds. According to the figures it did that without much trouble; the profit for the past two years had been nearly five thousand. The profit was to be his share.

His.

As Charles Rayner, he had a private bank account with a credit of over two thousand pounds, and Government securities which made him worth ten times as much as Roger West.

This opened a completely new vista; he could call himself rich. He felt the lure of wealth; began, as the days passed, to expect the little luxuries he had never had before. He could stand outside himself, in an odd fashion, and watch the effect of this on him. He took to luxury and plenty of money as a duck took to water.

Harry, who "did" for him, was a quiet, vague individual, with a doleful face and big, brown eyes, a perfect servant who never intruded; that was part of the luxury attack on him. There was tea first thing in the morning, a drink ready before luncheon and dinner, perfectly cooked food, pressed clothes—everything.

He had accounts at three exclusive restaurants and two big stores. He bought clothes of good quality and cut. He could have whatever he wanted, and had only to sign the bill and, later, the cheque.

Kennedy didn't come again during the next ten days. He heard nothing from Kyle or from Sloan. He was withdrawn more completely from his old life than he had ever dreamed possible. The past had begun as a nightmare and become a distant dream; frighteningly distant. He had to remind himself of it and also to remind himself of his chief objective—to find out the truth about Kennedy and all Kennedy stood for.

He found the business, as such, absorbing; there were many callers. He bought from this man and sold to that; he found that the business had many old and valuable contacts. It could get foods which were in short supply with little difficulty, and therefore could

command its own price. There was nothing in short supply in which the firm didn't deal, but he checked carefully and found that everything was above board and legal.

There was one thick barrier to all investigations; everywhere he went, he was watched. Waking and sleeping, he knew that he was watched.

Day by day, he grew into life as Charles Rayner.

Day by day, Roger West receded.

By the end of three weeks, he knew that the greatest danger to success would be himself; the new conditions, the constant surveillance and the desire to be free from it —and real freedom would come only when Kennedy was sure of him—worked together to soften his mind. Soften— or harden it?

Exactly a month after Kyle's visit, he sent a registered letter to Mr. John Pearson at the Strand G.P.O. Kyle didn't telephone; Roger was at once pleased and sorry about that.

It was on the morning after he had posted the money to Kyle that he received a letter marked "Personal". It was the first he had received since coming to the flat, and Harry brought it to him with his morning tea. He waited until the man had gone, and then opened it with unsteady fingers. Inside was a single slip of paper on which were two words: Kyle's dead.

The morning papers confirmed it; Kyle had "fallen" in front of a train at Edgware Road Tube Station.

Kennedy came on the telephone later in the day. "Did you get my message?"

"Yes."

"Take it to heart. I've a job for you."

"Where?"

"You'll be brought to me—remember the male nurse? You can call him Percy. He'll meet you at the corner of Putney Bridge, near the old theatre. Just make sure you're not followed. Leave at once—

Percy will expect you in an hour's time."

Kennedy rang off. Roger leaned back in his chair and faced up to the new situation. For the first time he was to be used for a job. He rang for Rose Morgan.

"Yes, Mr. Rayner."

"I'm going out, and I don't know what time I'll be back."

"Yes, Mr. Rayner."

"Tell Harry he needn't get luncheon, but I expect to be in for dinner."

"Yes, Mr. Rayner."

"See Renfrew when he comes, and apologize—say I'm ill. Handle everything else yourself."

"Yes, Mr. Rayner."

Rose was like a machine.

Roger put on his hat and went downstairs. He reached the Strand and beckoned a taxi from a rank. "Harrods," he said, and sat back, looking out of the tiny rear window. No one followed him except the usual stream of traffic. Three quarters of an hour after getting the message, he was at Putney Bridge.

Percy sat at the wheel of a big, roomy black Daimler— an old model, but it had an air. Percy was in chauffeur's uniform and wore a peak cap. He nodded, but didn't smile when he got out and opened the door for Roger, behaving in the same way as Rose Morgan—like a machine. Roger sat back on the luxurious seat, and a feeling of well-being came upon him like a cloud or a shroud. He watched the traffic coming over the bridge and along Putney High Street, with its steep hill. At the top, the driver turned right towards Richmond. Not far along he heard a whirring sound which reminded him vividly of the cine-camera at the nursing home.

The blinds were dropping at the windows; they were worked from a control button at the front.

The Daimler gathered speed, took corners easily, hummed

along a main road where, judging from the sounds, there was little traffic. They went on for more than half an hour, and were well out of London when the car turned a corner sharply and went along a bumpy road. Soon it turned again, at the foot of a hill so steep that Percy had to change gear. They crawled to the top of the hill, and stopped.

The blinds shot up; sunlight streamed into the Daimler, dazzling Roger. When he was accustomed to the glare, he saw they were outside a small country house. Trees were packed densely behind the house. In front there was a long drive; lawns and flower-gardens, with tulips and wallflowers in brightly coloured beds, misty forget-me-nots adding a background of blue. It was delightful; and it overlooked sweeping countryside. The road along which they had come was hidden by a fringe of oak and beech.

"Out," said Percy, opening the door.

Roger said: "One day you're going to change your tone, Percy." The little man glared, but made no comment. Roger went up three stone steps and stood beneath a brick porch, warm, browny-red. The door was of natural oak, oiled, not painted, and was studded with iron nail-heads. As he reached it, a man opened the door—a stranger and obsequious.

"Mr. Rayner?"

"Yes."

"This way, sir, please." The door closed behind them, and Roger was led up a wide staircase: wider than the outside of the house had led him to expect. He went across the square landing. A passage led to a window through which the bright sunlight glowed. Several doors led off it, and he was taken to the first door on the right. The man tapped, and opened it.

"Mr. Rayner, madame," he said, and stood aside for Roger to pass.

Madame?

CHAPTER XIV

"MADAME"

SHE wasn't like Marion, Lucille, or even Janet, simply an attractive woman; she was beautiful—and young. She sat in a chair at a small bow-shaped mahogany desk, with the sun streaming through the window behind her, so that her features were in shadow. She smiled faintly, and indicated a chair; she didn't get up and didn't offer her hand.

The chair was placed opposite the window, so that she could sec every feature and every line on his face. She pushed a silver cigarette-box across the desk, and waited for him to light up; she didn't take a cigarette herself.

She wore a white blouse, simple, plain, and fastened high at the neck. Her voice was pitched low; it was somehow less attractive than he had expected, with a faint accent he couldn't place.

"Mr. Kennedy tells me that you will be able to help me," she said. "I understand that you have a considerable experience of police matters, criminal law, and all the relative factors."

"That's right."

"Mr. Kennedy assures me that your services are at my disposal. Is that true?"

"Yes," he said.

She went on quickly:

"My husband is under remand at Brixton Jail. I think it probable that the prosecution would be able to prove their case against him. If it should be proved, he is likely to serve a long prison sentence. I have copies of all the statements he has made to his legal advisers, and I want you to study them. There are, also, details of the charge and a summary of the evidence against him, so far as we are aware of it. I want you to study all those papers and

form an opinion as to the likely result of the trial. If there is a weakness in the case for the prosecution, I want you to elaborate it, so that my husband's counsel can be properly primed. He is charged with smuggling currency from a number of foreign countries into this country; with smuggling sterling out of Great Britain to the Continent."

"I'm no expert on currency," Roger told her.

"You can assess the case in the light of the evidence that will be given you. You will work here—is that convenient ?"

It might take hours; a day; or several days. But Kennedy had pledged his services, and the obvious thing was to say: "Yes."

"Thank you. What is your fee, Mr. Rayner?" she asked.

"I'll tell you when I've had a look at the job."

"Very well."

"Unless you would rather deal with Mr. Kennedy," he said.

She shook her head.

"I have paid him a fee for the introduction, and this aspect of the matter is now between you and me. If your work is satisfactory in every way, I shall not be ungenerous. It is essential that my husband should not serve a prison sentence."

There was something else in her mind, but he didn't judge this the moment to probe.

"Where shall I work?"

"I will have you taken to your room, and the papers will be sent to you," she said. "You may ring for anything you require. While you are here, I would prefer you not to leave the grounds—in fact, to go no farther than the garden fence."

She rang the bell, and the interview was over.

* * * *

Roger knew where he had seen her face before—in the newspapers.

It had been a bad likeness, but he had placed her when she

had talked of currency smuggling—one of the biggest rackets with which the Yard was dealing, one with widespread ramifications and an incredible number of loopholes. She was Mrs. James Delaney—the Honourable Mrs. James Delaney. Her husband was the son of an impoverished peer, and as far as the Press reports had implied, the charges against him were trivial. So this was a job where the Yard had played canny with the Press, giving no indication of the scope of the offences.

His room was large, and had every comfort; it overlooked the garden at the back. Off with the old luxury, on with the new. Tea arrived; and half an hour afterwards, two bulky brief-cases were brought in. Then he was left on his own. . . .

He felt a strange nostalgia.

Here was his work; the careful study of amassed facts, the scrutiny of detail, the building up of a case. This one had started when a Customs officer had discovered that Delaney was taking a hundred pounds above the allowed maximum, in sterling, out of the country—nothing remarkable. But some correspondence had been found in his cases—the fools always had something like that, they seldom destroyed all the evidence—showing a list of French and Swiss people with whom Delaney was in contact. Currency smugglers, all small, had been in touch with the same people. There was an astonishingly detailed account of what the Yard man had asked Delaney and what information he had given away.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he had finished, rubbed his eyes after the concentrated reading, and rang the bell. The footman answered him promptly.

"I would like to see Madame," Roger said.

"Madame would like you to dine with her, sir, and dinner will be at eight-thirty. It is not usual to change."

* * * *

She had changed into a black dress which had touches of

white at the cuffs and neck. She waited for him in a small room, off the dining-room; there was an elaborate steel and coloured-glass cocktail bar. She was grave when she offered him a drink; grave while they drank; she looked pale but not worried, and she knew what the answer was going to be. But she didn't ask a question until dinner was nearly over and they were at the sweet; it had been a meal to dream about.

She looked at him suddenly.

"Have you reached an opinion?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You're quite right. He has little chance of getting off."

"Have you found any loop-hole?"

"There isn't one. He wasn't clever when dealing with the police."

"No," she said, and smiled, as a mother might smile over an erring child. "He isn't used to dealing with the police. He is under remand———"

"There was a note about that. He's at Brixton, and the case comes up at the Old Bailey on Monday or Tuesday next week. I'm sorry, but it's a simple fact that he hasn't a chance. You probably think it's harsh, because before the war this wouldn't have been an offence, but——" he shrugged. "At least he hasn't involved you in any way."

"I am not involved. I didn't know what he was doing. I had no idea that I owed so much to that particular kind of activity." She smiled; she was really quite beautiful. "I am vain enough to think he probably sank deeper and deeper into it, because of me; that is why it is essential that I should help him. He mustn't go to prison."

"You can't prevent it."

"He wouldn't go to prison if he were never tried, would he?"

Roger saw the truth then, in a blinding flash.

“And he won’t be tried if he’s removed from Brixton before the trial or on the way, will he? You know the daily routine at Brixton thoroughly—I want you to decide what is the best way to get him out. Then I want you to organize it. I have everything ready to leave the country; once I am safely away with him there will be nothing to worry about. Mr. Kennedy is extremely able, and he is arranging all that for me. Don’t say that it can’t be done, Mr. Rayner. It must be done.”

CHAPTER XV

JAIL BREAK

PERCY drove Roger from the Delaney house to London, and they picked Kennedy up at Putney Bridge. It was high time Roger knew where to find Kennedy; high time he went over to the attack, but— patience was vital, Kennedy was still dangerously wary.

Kennedy sank down in his corner and spoke almost as soon as the door closed.

"She says you're very sure of yourself."

"I am." Roger had told the woman that it could be done; and knew that it could.

"When are you going to do it ?"

"Sunday night. There's always less discipline on Sunday night at any jail."

"I'll believe you. How are you going to do the job?"

"I want two powerful men, one waiter's rig-out, one police-constable's uniform, and a girl, to give me an alibi. The uniform must be a good one, with genuine fixings— numbers and badges. Dinner will be taken into his room that night by my waiter. My constable will follow and deal with the duty warder. I shall want to drill that constable and waiter myself, and they need to be good. You'll have to make arrangements with the restaurant from which Delaney gets his special food to allow my waiter to work for them that night."

"What risks are you going to take yourself?"

Roger laughed. "I'll drive the car we get away in, if you call that a risk."

"I can't see the scheme yet," Kennedy said.

"I'll work that out with the two men and the girl— you're not interested in the scheme, only in the results."

Kennedy laughed; his eyes were half-closed, just silvery slits.

"In some ways you're better than I expected, Rayner! What else do you want from me?"

"Two cars. An ordinary, shabby one outside the prison, and a fast one stationed half a mile away. How are you going to get the couple out of the country?"

"By air."

"Where from?"

"I've a private airfield near Watford."

"I don't want to know where it is, yet," said Roger, "but when I'm in that fast car, I want someone with me who knows the road and can guide me there without losing a minute. Then I want a different car ready at the airfield to take me away. All right?"

"I'll see you," said Kennedy. "I want you to keep going, don't make any mistake about that."

* * * *

It was dark outside Brixton Jail. Only a few lights glowed at the street lamps; beyond the high grey walls, dim yellow squares shone against blackness. Two policemen stood on duty outside the iron gates. A little Morris car, grey, dirty, and with adjustable registration plates which could be changed by pressing a button in the dashboard, was round the corner from the gates. Roger sat at the wheel, with a girl by his side—a pretty little blonde showing no intelligence and no nerves; if she had any, she didn't betray them that night, She would swear, if need be, that he had been with her all the evening, at her rooms.

He knew what was happening inside, could follow every move of the policeman and the waiter.

* * * *

The waiter had arrived first.

There was a trail of them, most nights, to the prisoners under remand, who had privileged treatment if they had plenty of money.

The waiter came from a nearby restaurant. He carried his tray, with a huge metal cover over it. The gate guards let him through. He walked to the main doors of the remand building, and there a warder lifted the lid off the tray.

"Don't let it get cold," said the waiter.

"Smells all right." The policeman lifted the lids off the three dishes. The light was good enough to let him make sure that nothing was being taken in which the prisoner might use—to help himself escape or to do violence; suicide was the most likely form of escape. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Days mostly. I'm doing a special turn to-night."

The warder laughed.

"Okay."

The waiter went inside. The building was badly lighted, bare, but not like a prison; the remand "cells" were plainly furnished rooms with low ceilings. Another warder, a tall, gangling man with drooping eyelids approached the waiter.

"Who for?"

"Mr. Delaney."

"Okay." The warder led the way, jangling his keys. A prisoner had a midget radio on, playing softly; it wasn't allowed, but there were ways and means, according to the station in life of the prisoner; you just didn't hear that music if you were on the staff. The warder unlocked the door of Delaney's room, and as he did so, a constable appeared at the end of the passage. He walked smartly along, as the waiter went inside followed by the warder.

The warder would watch every movement, make sure that nothing but the food passed from waiter to prisoner.

Delaney sat in an easy-chair. He was fair, blue-eyed, slim, dressed well—almost an exquisite. His expression spoiled his good looks; he was frowning, and looked as if he were suffering physical pain. He didn't look up as the waiter approached the small table

and began to lay the cloth. A cigarette drooped from his lips, and his eyes were closed; he had long curling lashes, as fair as his hair.

The constable turned into the room.

"Now what?" asked the warder.

"Mr. Carnody sent me from the Yard," said the constable easily. Carnody was a Yard Superintendent who dealt most frequently with Brixton. "Just seen old Do-Do. He said you could tell me what I want. About him." He nodded casually towards the drooping prisoner.

"Just you wait a minute," said the warder.

"Okay, okay." The policeman unbuttoned the breast pocket of his tunic, and looked up and down the passage.

No one else was in sight. He drew out what looked like a white pencil, and the warder watched the waiter.

"Now," said the policeman.

"Shut up," said the warder, and turned his head.

The policeman broke the white "pencil" across the other's chin and drove a terrific punch into his stomach. The warder gasped and doubled up; and tear gas, billowing up in a whitish cloud, stung his mouth, nose and eyes. As he staggered back, the waiter snatched a gas-mask from his pocket and tossed it to Delaney.

"Put that on—quick!"

Delaney gaped.

"Put it on." The waiter slipped a mask over his own face, the constable did the same with swift, practised movements. The waiter helped Delaney with his. The policeman bent over the warder and struck him on the nape of the neck with a length of rubber; the man stopped spluttering and struggling, but wheezed badly.

The waiter said in a muffled voice: "Get your top clothes off," and tugged at Delaney's coat sleeve.

Delaney jumped to it then.

* * * *

Roger felt Delaney's hands and body shaking.

"Take it easy," he said.

They were in the fast car, half a mile from Brixton and no alarm had been raised. The waiter and the girl were now in the muddy grey Morris, which was still parked along the road. This car, a Buick, leapt along.

"You'll be all right. Your wife has fixed this. There's an aeroplane waiting to take you out of the country. Everything's fixed —just sit back."

There was little traffic on a Sunday night, and no need to go through the West End. Roger kept strictly down to the speed limit of thirty miles an hour while he was in the built-up area. Policemen, people, cars, and buses passed them, cinema lights glowed; but soon they were in the suburbs and on the main arterial road. Roger opened out. Delaney, who hadn't uttered a word, said at last: "Who —who are you?"

"Never mind."

"Where are we going?"

"Airfield, near Watford."

"Are you sure——"

"There's a whisky flask in the dashboard pocket. Have a good nip. You'll be out of the country in two hours, and your wife will be with you."

Delaney kept the bottle to his lips long enough to drain the flask. Roger watched the telegraph wires and poles flashing by. He'd altered his original plans in only one way; he'd driven along this road the previous night, so as to become familiar with it, and didn't need a passenger for a guide. The lights of Watford stretched out in front of them, tiny glims in the darkness. They reached the airfield, where two aeroplanes, both small, were warming up. A flare glowed like a torch of liberty.

Beneath a tiny hangar, Mrs. Delaney waited. The pilot of their aircraft called : “You ready?” Two or three other people watched from the surrounding darkness, Roger felt their gaze. Was Kennedy here ? Or Percy ? He felt the keen wind as he opened the door. Delaney got out the other side, and his wife rushed towards him.

“Save it!” snapped Roger. “Get in.”

She turned towards him, and there was just enough light to show her beauty and the glow in her eyes. She thrust a thick packet into his hands.

He watched them climb in; saw the mechanic take the chocks away from the wheels, and stood by the side of the car as the aircraft taxied along the even grassland and then took off. Roger didn’t wait any longer, but got back into the car and drove as far as the gates. There, a smaller car was parked with the headlights on.

A man stood by it: Percy.

“Not bad,” Percy said. It was the nearest thing to a friendly word that he had uttered.

“Change the number plates of that Buick before you go anywhere,” Roger said. “And don’t go back along the main road. Risk a late night.”

“Think you were followed?”

“I know I wasn’t followed. I also know the fantastic coincidences that can catch crooks.”

“Okay, okay,” said Percy. “Your night out.”

No one was in Lyme Street, no one watched from the shadowy doorways. Roger walked briskly from the Strand, and turned into his doorway. As he unlocked the front door he glanced right and left. Now that he was back and it was over, his heart beat like a trip-hammer. He stepped inside and closed the door, then wiped off the perspiration on his forehead. So often he had waited, at just such a place as this, to catch a crook who believed that he’d been completely successful. He switched on a landing-light, which had

another control switch upstairs. The building was silent. He reached his own door—the flat—unlocked it and went inside. It was Harry's night out, and the flat was in darkness. He went from room to room, switching on the lights. He mixed himself a drink, looked at the dish of sandwiches and the plate of smoked salmon left for him by Harry, and laughed. He lit a cigarette. Then he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He showed signs of strain.

He took the packet which Mrs. Delaney had given him from beneath his coat. It was of brown paper, heavily sealed. He opened it. There were packs of one-pound notes inside, some new, most of them old, all tightly held together by adhesive paper. He counted one pack—a hundred. There were five packs. There was something else, too—a piece of cotton wool, which dropped from the paper and fell at his feet. He picked it up. Something hard was inside it. He unwrapped it, and a single diamond scintillated dazzlingly, the size of a small peanut, worth— he couldn't guess what it was worth.

There was a fortune in crime.

He washed, then started on the sandwiches—he was ravenous. Half-way through, the telephone bell rang. He had to get up to answer it. He seldom had calls, and they were always from Kennedy or Percy. He lifted the telephone, and was surprised that his own voice was harsh.

"Hallo?"

"Mr. Rayner?"

"Yes, speaking."

The man at the other end hung up without another word — and left his voice ringing in Roger's ears. The voice had been unmistakable: Bill Sloan had called.

Why to-night?

Why now?

* * * *

Roger picked up the Sunday newspapers. His own *Times,*

Observer, and *Express* were there, together with Harry's *Sunday Cry*. He'd seen his own, glanced through the *Cry* —and suddenly stopped breathing.

His photograph—the real West's—looked up at him.

He scanned the article, saw a mention of Copse Cottage, and sat very still.

CHAPTER XVI

BULL-DOG

THE front-door bell rang.

Sloan couldn't have reached here as quickly as that, even if he'd called from a kiosk nearby. Roger got up, and the bell rang again. He went to it slowly, not worrying about the caller's impatience, searching for any weakness in his own alibi.

The bell started to ring again as he opened the door.

Kennedy said: "Getting lazy ? Like someone to replace Harry on his night off?" He came forward.

Roger barred his way.

"You choose the damnedest times for coming. When you're wanted you're not here, when you're not wanted you find your way. Is Percy downstairs with the car?"

"No." Kennedy stood on the threshold, too startled to protest, and worried for the second time since Roger had known him. "What's wrong?"

"I've just had a call from Detective Inspector Sloan, and I fancy he's on his way here. I don't know why he chose to-night, and I hope the reason isn't what I think it might be. If I were you, I'd go into the office, wait until he's come into this room, and then leave."

"I don't think I like your friend Sloan," said Kennedy in a soft voice. He glanced over his shoulder towards the stairs. There was no sound.

Roger said: "Forget it, Kennedy. I'll tell you here and now there's one thing I won't lake. That's violence against the police."

"Won't you?"

"No. Get into the office."

"Did he say he was coming here?"

"No, that's why I think he is. He telephoned. The D's have

taken off, I can't think of anything that's gone wrong, except you calling." The whispered voices couldn't travel far, but he wondered if Sloan were here and near enough to see the shadows on the top landing. "Have you an office key?"

"You like giving orders, don't you? Watch yourself."

Roger said: "Hurry."

Kennedy crossed the landing and let himself into the office, making hardly a sound. Roger went back to the living-room, put the money and diamond into a drawer, locked it and pocketed the key, then went slowly downstairs. He peered into the dark corners of each landing and the passage; there was no trace of Sloan, and nowhere the Yard man could hide. He opened the door and went into the street and strolled up and down; two people turned into the street, but neither took any notice of him or turned into Number 15. Sloan hadn't arrived yet. He withdrew into the doorway and heard a car turn the corner. Headlights blazed and shone on to Number 15, but he dodged back in time to avoid them, left the door unlocked, and went upstairs.

He put on all the lights and was eating another sandwich when the flat door-bell rang. He let it ring, as with Kennedy, but Sloan wasn't so impatient and didn't ring again. When Roger opened the door, Sloan stood back from it, head on one side, smiling with taut lips.

"Who——" began Roger.

"Remember me?" asked Sloan.

Roger relaxed. "Well, well, it's the policeman who came to my house-warming! Don't you rest on Sundays?"

"Policemen never have any time off."

"Come in and relax," said Roger. He wished the lights weren't so bright; putting all on had been a mistake. It was easy to understand mistakes which crooks made, now, the list of possible slips was a mile long. He felt a tug of the tension he had

experienced when Sloan had first come here, and when he had seen Janet and Mark.

Sloan looked round and tossed his hat into a chair.

"You do yourself well."

"I'm a successful business man. Have a sandwich."

"Thanks." If Sloan had a weakness, it was for food. "You're very affable to-night."

"I've been enjoying myself," Roger said, and grinned. "You like these unofficial visits, don't you?"

"I never pay calls when I'm off duty, you can call me the man who's always on the job."

"What will you drink?" asked Roger.

"Beer, if there is any."

"Other people besides policemen drink beer." The conversation was too slick. Roger hadn't any idea whether Sloan had come because of the Brixton job, but as his mind roamed restlessly about the possibility, he didn't see where he could have slipped up. He poured beer into a glass tankard and had a gin for himself; gin, because as Roger West, he had never drunk it. He kept his voice hard and spoke with little movement of his lips; he was more afraid of his voice than of anything else, when with Sloan. "What do you want?" he asked.

"That's a leading question. Been places to-night, do you say?"

"A nice little girl," Roger said dreamily. "Sweet and innocent, no intelligence, no questions, a nice little healthy little pleasant little animal. They still grow like that. Suppose you tell me why you want to see me."

"I hope you're in a more talkative mood than the last time."

"You've discovered all you want to know about me, haven't you?"

"Not enough. I don't know all your friends."

"The Kennedy one?" Roger laughed.

“Wrong name, right initial. Remember Mr. Kyle?”

Roger said, “Kyle, Kyle?” He stood his ground, but wanted to sit down. “Kyle—oh, the little crook who came to see me just before you arrived that day. Yes, I remember.”

“You’ve a good memory. Heard from him lately?”

“No.”

“Surprising,” said Sloan, and grinned. “He carried a slip of paper round in his pocket, with a different name on it, care of the Strand G.P.O. When he was brought in last, that piece of paper turned up. I went and collected a letter addressed to the alias from the Post Office. There was nothing written inside, but there were ten pound notes. Are you a philanthropist?”

“Not yet.”

“Did you send that money to him?”

“No. Ask him.”

“Don’t you know what happens to your friends?”

“He wasn’t a friend of mine. He——”

“Friends of yours are liable to die suddenly, aren’t they? By accident?”

“So he’s dead!” said Roger, and frowned. “What do you expect me to do? Cry about a man I’ve only seen once in my life, and didn’t want to see again ?”

“What about the girl?”

Roger poured himself out another gin, refilled Sloan’s tankard, and hoped he was as casual as he ought to be. “I don’t follow? The girl I’ve just left——”

“No, not her. Marion Day.”

Sloan’s approach was puzzling. He was giving more away than a good policeman should. He had chosen to come on a Sunday night because it was the least likely time for a detective to call, and that was good tactics—but apart from that, he was being too clever.

Roger said slowly: “Marion Day ? No, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

Sloan laughed, spontaneously; there was nothing at all sinister about it.

"Ringing a bell is good." He took a photograph from his pocket—of Marion. He thrust it forward under Roger's nose. "Have a good look."

Roger said : "I've seen her before, somewhere, but I don't remember where, just now. I don't know her well."

"You will, if you ever join her," said Sloan cryptically. "Either someone is storing up a lot of trouble for you, or you're storing it up for yourself." He came forward and looked hard into Roger's eyes. "There was a telephone number with that alias of Kyle's—Temple Bar 89511. Your office number. There was a telephone number in that girl's handbag—T.B. 89511. Can you explain either?"

"Kyle, possibly because he'd been here, and might have wanted to try again. The girl——" Roger shook his head, but felt tension rising. "No, there's no reason why she should have the number. There's one thing you've probably overlooked."

"What?"

"There are eleven people in my office. One of them might be involved—might be a friend of these people. I wouldn't know."

"I'll find out," said Sloan. "In fact I'm finding out, Rayner. These two people were killed by accident, if you believe the coroner, but I don't always agree with inquest verdicts." He finished his beer and took out cigarettes from a familiar yellow packet. Roger took one. "Remember the Copse Cottage murder?" Sloan asked, and his eyes were close to Roger's above the flame of his lighter.

It wasn't fair; the dice were loaded against Sloan. The slight pause, the nonchalance of manner, were preliminaries to a rapier thrust; strangers wouldn't know, but Sloan had learned these very tricks from Roger.

"There are so many murders," Roger said. "Copse Cottage—

no. Well, vaguely. How long ago was it?"

Sloan said: "Say a couple of months."

"Murderer still free?"

"Yes. A girl was battered to death. Her killer escaped, and that was quite a sensation, because he was kidnapped from the police, a gang was involved. You wouldn't know anything about criminal gangs, would you?"

"Plenty. I read my newspapers."

Sloan said harshly: "You're just that much too clever. Ever used the name of Kennedy?"

"No."

"Where did you get your money from to buy the business from Kennedy?" Sloan asked roughly.

Roger said: "I hypnotized him into letting me have it, and he didn't have a chance. It wasn't from anyone named Kennedy, anyhow, it was from Samuel Wiseman. I still don't see where all this is getting, Mr. Policeman."

Sloan shrugged and turned to pick up his tankard— danger flared again.

"This is just the preliminary stage, I'm making my man uneasy. What did you do before you bought this business?"

"I made a small fortune in Africa. People still can."

That was in the records Kennedy had provided of his past.

"I'll check that, too," said Sloan. "When you were in Africa, or after you came back, did you ever have a visit from Chief Inspector West?"

CHAPTER XVII

CAUSE FOR ALARM

Roger had sensed a thrust coming and had his defences up. They weren't strong enough to withstand that. He jerked his head up. Sloan grinned; Sloan had never seemed so sinister. Roger didn't answer. Sloan moved towards him and put a hand on his shoulder and pressed hard; it was a familiar grip used when a policeman was going to charge a man, and enjoy doing it.

"So you did," said Sloan.

Roger said: "No, I didn't have a call from West." He forced a laugh. "But that name startled me. I was reading an article about him in to-day's Cry." That was true enough, but was it a get out? Sloan looked disappointed, and took his hand away, but that didn't mean that it was safe to breathe freely. "He disappeared, after—great Scott! The Copse Cottage murder!"

"Which you didn't remember, although you read about it this afternoon."

Roger said: "The article was about West, the murder was hardly mentioned. Another drink?"

"No, thanks. Sure you've never seen West?"

"He's never called on me, you're the first policeman I've met at close quarters." Roger offered cigarettes, and Sloan took one and examined the tip thoughtfully. "I still don't know what you're getting at."

Sloan said softly: "Roger West was a good friend of mine."

"Was he?"

"That canard in the Cry isn't worth the paper it's written on. Oh, it doesn't say anything openly, but it makes a pretty broad hint. West was a very good friend of mine. I think he was trapped and killed and his name smeared with muck, and I've just one job in my

spare time—finding out the truth of that."

"You'd better find the writer of that article."

"I can find him whenever I want him," said Sloan.

"Pity you can't say the same about your friend."

"Yes," said Sloan heavily. "Listen to me, Rayner. I've spent a lot of time checking on your past and what you do. I haven't found anything much against you. I'll tell you something that I wouldn't if I were here officially to-night. I like the cut of your jib. I don't think you're a bad 'un, and I can smell bad 'uns. You might be mixed up in something which you don't know about. The man who owned this business wasn't Wiseman, but a certain Mr. Kennedy. I think Kennedy can tell me something about

Roger said: "You get odd ideas, but I can't speak for Kennedy. I dealt with Wiseman."

"Please yourself," said Sloan. He half-turned in preparation for another thrust. "Rayner, I've just come from West's wife. She's pathetic. She's afraid that he's dead, but she doesn't know for certain. She's frightened by things she can't understand. She's had a lot of that Cry muck poured into her, and it hurts her like hell. She knows what I know about West—there wasn't a straighter man living. I'm going to scrape the mud off West's name somehow. If you're smeared with that mud, look out. If you're not——"

Roger said: "I'm sorry for his wife." He didn't know how he got the words out, but Sloan didn't seem to notice any oddness in the sound of his voice. Sloan might be foxing or, but more likely, had been carried away with his own emotions.

"All right," Sloan said. "Tell your friend Kennedy what I've said."

He went to the door. Roger let him out.

* * * *

Roger closed the door and went back to the sitting-room and saw nothing except the image of Janet's face, superimposed on the

memory of Sloan's. His eyes stung, his hands were clammy. He sat down and leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling and at that image. It wasn't a help to know that Sloan kept faith; nothing was a help.

Then he opened his eyes. The sight of sandwiches nauseated him. He poured himself out a strong whisky and soda.

It was a waste of time trying to guess how and why Sloan had so quickly connected Kyle, Marion, and Kennedy with him. He could see the build-up in Sloan's mind; add to that Sloan's tenacity, and in this case his burning desire to get at the truth, and it was all the explanation needed. By far the most important factor was the fact that Sloan had reason to suspect Kennedy.

Roger got up, took the money and the diamond out of the drawer and locked it in the small safe. Sloan had forced the pace. He himself had played cautiously for as long as he dared, and Kennedy was half-way to trusting him. He had never done a thing, since Kyle's visit, to cause distrust. He was no longer followed everywhere, but in spite of that, he hadn't put a foot wrong.

The first task was to find Kennedy's home address.

As he was turning away, the telephone bell rang. It was Kennedy, who said:

"Well?"

"I must see you." That rasping note should shake the man's composure.

"I'll come——"

"You won't, you're to keep away from here. Get that into your head. Where are you?"

"I'll meet you——"

"Listen," said Roger, "I'm not a stooge any longer, I'm a partner. We take the same risks, by relying on each other. I'm not going on with hole-in-corner business. Where are you?"

Kennedy said: "Percy will pick you up in half an hour's time,

outside the Burlington Arcade. He'll bring you to me."

* * * *

Roger went into the kitchen, tore some paper into squares, and, with steady hands, shook a little flour out of a tin into each square. Then he screwed the pieces of paper up; he had a dozen little screws when he'd finished. He wiped all trace of the flour away, and put the bags, wrapped in a large handkerchief, into his pocket.

* * * *

Percy was at the wheel of the Daimler, and didn't get out. Roger climbed in. The car moved off swiftly, and the blinds fell, with the familiar whirring. Roger opened the side ventilation window, and waited until the car had turned two corners, then tossed one of the small screws of flour out. He waited for three more turns, and tossed another.

The journey took fifteen minutes, and he didn't think they had gone farther than five minutes away from the Arcade; Percy had been driving over the same ground. As they slowed down, he dropped out another paper-bag.

Percy opened the door without letting up the blinds, Roger glanced up and down the dark street. Except that it was one of London's squares, he couldn't identify it. He glanced down at the pavement; the little white bag had burst ten yards or so away, the flour showed pale blue beneath a lamp.

He followed Percy to the house and saw that the number painted on a round pillar was twenty-seven. A manservant opened the door; so Kennedy lived in style. Percy came in and, without a word, took him upstairs. It was luxurious: carpets, tapestries on the walls, good furniture and soft lighting—the home you would expect of a millionaire. Percy led the way to a room on the right, tapped and opened it at a call.

It was a study; book-lined, with a magnificent carved-oak

desk; a film set of a room falling just short of opulence. Kennedy stood by a white Adam mantelpiece, with a brandy glass in his hand and his eyes only slightly open. He tipped his head back to look at Roger.

"All right, Percy," he said.

He was in a dinner-jacket. A cigar, half-smoked, lay on an ash-tray on the mantelpiece. On another, at the side of a chair, was a half-smoked cigarette; it was red-tipped, so a woman had been here to dinner.

The door closed with a click.

"What's the cause for alarm, West?"

The slip. West instead of Rayner, betrayed Kennedy's state of nerves. If Kennedy realized what he had done, he had the wit not to correct himself.

Roger said: "Why didn't you tell me you were wanted by the police?"

Kennedy said softly: "But I'm not, and you know I'm not. You had a previous visit from Sloan, and he slung the name Kennedy into the conversation."

"He's after you," Roger said abruptly. "What's more he's connected you with Kyle, Marion, and—with me. Don't ask me how."

Kennedy turned, took the cigar and drew at it, took it from his mouth and looked at the faint red glow beneath the pale-grey ash. He was quite steady.

"I should like to hear more about it."

"You can listen to your dictaphone recording in the morning," Roger said. "I thought I was the big risk in this outfit. Now I know that you are. Have the police got anything on you?"

"They've a name, that's all. You know me as Kennedy. A few other people do. I'm not known here as Kennedy. That isn't my name. I'm careful, Rayner." He slipped back into the use of Rayner

easily. “They don’t know anything against Kennedy. They might suspect him of a few minor crimes, that’s all. There’s no need to fly into a panic.”

“Call it what you like. This is dangerous. Sloan came to warn me that I was playing with bad men when I played with Kennedy.”

Kennedy said: “Perhaps he thinks you’re honest!” He didn’t seem to be amused. “I’ve always been worried by the man Sloan, he got on to Kyle too quickly. He was after the men behind Kyle, of course, that’s——”

“How the police get half of their results. They pick up a man on one thing, and find he’s connected with another. They’re much better than you’ve ever given them credit for.”

Kennedy said: “Maybe. Would Sloan have a dossier on you, this Kennedy, and anything else to do with the case?”

“He’d keep a record, probably in his desk—more likely there than at his home. Few policemen keep everything in their heads. They never know what they’ll forget—and they never know when they might run into trouble, so they leave their testimony behind them. Sloan usually kept his note-book in his desk.”

“Would he talk to anyone about this?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“He hasn’t any close friends at the Yard. He’s young— young for his rank, too. He and I were usually together on a job. He’d confide in me. And on this job, he’s more likely than usual to keep it to himself, because I’m at the bottom of it. He’d feel that the others were laughing at him for thinking I’d been framed—most of them have probably assumed that I killed the girl at Copse Cottage.”

Kennedy drew at the cigar again.

“I see. Have a drink, Rayner? I can recommend the brandy, or ——”

“I wouldn’t mind a whisky.”

“Please yourself.” Kennedy poured out. “Do you know of anyone at the Yard you could bribe?”

The question wasn’t a surprise, was no more than Roger had to expect. He took the glass and didn’t answer.

“Do you?” The other’s voice was thin and harsh.

He had to win Kennedy’s confidence; there was no drawing back.

“I wouldn’t like to say. There are one or two I didn’t trust, but I doubt if they’d sell anything that mattered.

We had our black sheep, though. There’s one——” he broke off and gulped down his whisky. “No, you’re crazy! The Brixton job was bad enough. Corrupting a Yard man——”

“You wouldn’t have to do it. The man who’d tackle the job would be prepared for trouble. He’d be safe enough from our side. But it might take him six months to find the right prospect. This is just another way you can help me, Rayner—and help yourself.”

Roger shrugged. “I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Who is the man you’ve got in mind?”

“Well—Detective Sergeant——”

“Small fry,” sneered Kennedy. “Do better.”

“He’s your best bet. You can’t get at the high rankers —I’ll stake my life on any one of them. This man, Sergeant Banister, is an old chap. He has a damning habit of antagonizing his seniors, especially Assistant Commissioners, and he’s failed at most of his exams. He’s good, but he can’t get promotion and the accompanying pay increase, and he has a rough time at home. His wife’s on the sick list—a chronic invalid. I don’t know how far he would go, but he’s your most likely prospect. What do you want?”

“Sloan’s desk note-book.”

“What else?”

“Anything about the Copse Cottage murder, you, Kyle,

Kennedy, and Marion—dossiers on them all. They're easy enough to get for a man inside, aren't they?"

Roger said: "They should be. They might be out— that means with the Assistant Commissioner, the Home Office, or one of the Superintendents. That wouldn't be for long, but if Banister played ball, he might not be able to get everything for a few days. But there's a snag."

"What is it?"

"Once the dossiers were missed, the Yard would make a grand slam against the people covered by them. You'd be surprised what happens when those experts really put their heads together. They know all the tricks, all the answers."

"I wouldn't want the papers for long; just long enough for them to be photolithoed."

Roger said: "Well, try Banister. Don't say I haven't warned you."

"I won't." Kennedy laughed—that curious laugh with his head back. "Beginning to see what a tower of strength you are to me? I've often wondered how much they've got on certain friends of mine. This will help me to find out."

Roger said: "No violence—with Sloan or anyone else."

"I know where to stop," said Kennedy. He looked earnest—until Roger glanced round at him from the door, five minutes later. Kennedy was grinning; at the thought of what was going to happen to Bill Sloan. This was like playing with T.N.T. The footman closed the door. Roger crossed the landing, and another door opened. A woman, small, chic, beautiful, looked straight at him. She wore a dinner-gown of black with lace half-revealing her shoulders and the gentle swell of her breast; she wore a tulle scarf, which wisped up at the back of her head. Her hair was corn-coloured. She didn't smile, but withdrew and closed the door.

Percy was waiting outside in the street.

"Where do you want dropping?" he asked.

"The same place will do."

Roger got in. A small car parked farther along the road moved after them. He didn't see it, once he was inside, because the blinds were down, but it was still behind them when he was dropped in Piccadilly. He walked slowly towards the Circus. It was a fine, starry night, with no wind. The lights of London were on again, and the Circus looked gay with the moving advertisements.

A man followed him.

He made no attempt to avoid the man, but walked to his flat. He went upstairs and switched on the light, then went cautiously down again. The man was lounging in a doorway, opposite. So Kennedy—whose name wasn't really Kennedy—had told Percy that the red light was on: Kennedy was making quite sure that Roger didn't try any tricks. The telephone was tapped, of course. If he'd made a mistake it was in telling Kennedy that he knew of the dictaphones; but Kennedy had probably already realized that he knew. The risk, the great almost unforgivable risk, was with Sloan.

Sloan was marked down for murder as surely as Lucille had been.

To-night? Possibly to-night, but not if he stayed indoors; this would be another accident, not open murder. Roger stood in front of the telephone, undecided. He could switch off the dictaphone, but a different contraption might be fitted to the telephone itself. He suspected that the other offices in the building were owned by Kennedy, but wasn't sure. He mustn't take a risk with that telephone.

How long would the guard remain outside?

He went back upstairs, sorted through a small tool-box in the kitchen, selected several, including a key that would serve as a pick-lock, and then remembered Harry; Harry was usually in by eleven o'clock on his nights off; it was now nearly ten, and an hour wasn't

enough for what Roger wanted to do. He would take a chance by waiting until Harry came back. Roger picked up a book and began to read, but couldn't concentrate. He switched on the radio; there was hymn singing. He read the Cry article again.

He didn't like it; he didn't like seeing the names of Janet, Scoopy, and Richard in print.

Then he heard Harry's key in the lock.

Harry walked in, smiling sombrely, asked if there were anything Roger wanted, and went to bed; he had a small room which wasn't included in the main rooms of the flat. Roger waited until the man had had time to undress and get into bed, then went into his own room, adjacent. He hummed to himself as he ran water from the tap, did everything as if he were going to retire. He switched on a small radio; there was dance music. He took fifty pound notes from the safe, then put on a pair of shoes with rubber soles and heels, wrapped up the tools and dropped them into his pocket, switched off the radio, and crept out.

At the front door he paused, to look towards Harry's door. A line of light showed underneath, but he heard no sound of movement. As an afterthought, he went into the living-room, tore a piece of gummed paper off the wrapping of Mrs. Delaney's package, and marked it with a pencil. He stuck this at the foot of his door, sealing door to frame. If Harry looked in to see if he were there, the paper would be broken and he would be warned.

He crept downstairs.

Harry hadn't replaced the guard; the man was still huddled in the doorway.

Roger turned to the ground-floor office of the building and worked on the door with his tools. The lock wasn't difficult, a policeman could crack a crib with any man if the need were great enough. He fiddled for five minutes before the lock clicked back. There were tell-tale signs at the door, marks of the tools, but they

probably wouldn't be noticed if nothing were stolen. He crept across a large office to the window which overlooked the yard—as did his office upstairs. The window was latched. He unfastened it and pushed the window up, climbed out into the concrete yard and then closed the window. He went to a narrow service alley which led to the next street, walked past the end of Lyme Street and saw the guard, and then averted his eyes quickly, for Percy swung round the corner in the Daimler.

The Daimler pulled up in front of the watcher, who hurried to it and climbed in. The Daimler moved off and was lost in the streets near Co vent Garden. That was reasonable proof that Kennedy relied on Harry to keep a watch on Roger at the flat; and with luck, Harry thought he was in bed. He needed luck. But he had never done anything to arouse Harry's suspicions and had made no attempt at independent action until to-night. He had to do a lot to-night.

The tools were heavy in his pocket as he went along the Strand, then into a side street where he knew there were telephone booths.

He dialled Sloan's private number.

He felt shivery as he did so, and as the *brrr-brrr* sounded. Was Sloan out? The ringing tone seemed unending. If Sloan were out, then he might run into trouble. *Brrr-brrr*. Sloan must be out, and it was too early for him to be in bed. *Brrr-kk*.

"Hallo?"

Roger schooled his voice. Sloan might guess it was Rayner, but he couldn't be sure.

"Mr. Sloan?"

"Yes."

"I'm warning you, Mr. Sloan. They're after you."

"Who——"

"Use your wits. There'll be an attack. Maybe a rundown. It'll

come quick. I'm warning you, Mr. Sloan."

"Listen! Who——"

"I've warned you, just look out. And there's another thing, Mr. Sloan."

"Well?" Sloan had stopped expecting to be told the name of his caller.

"Remember the Copse Cottage job. Girl you never traced. Have a try in Paris. 23 Rue de Croix, District 8. Got that?"

"23 Rue de Croix, 8. Yes. Will you——"

"It's the same job, and they mean to get you."

Roger rang off and slipped out of the box. That was as far as he dared go; farther than was safe. He walked to the Strand and beckoned a taxi from the rank near the Savoy.

"Do you know Ealing?"

"Palm of me 'and, brother!"

"Try and find Merrivale Avenue, will you?"

"Orf the Common, 'seasy. There an' back?"

"With a wait in between."

"It'll cost yer the world." The cabby laughed his joke off. Roger sat back, legs crossed, watching the passing lights, letting his thoughts roam. A great deal depended on whether he got back without being missed. He smoked two cigarettes, and was half-way through a third when the cabby slowed down near Ealing Common Station.

"What number, Merrivale?"

"Thirty-five."

"Okay."

Number 35 Merrivale Avenue was a small house, standing in a tiny patch of garden, which even under the light of the stars, looked neat and tidy. No lights were on; it was now nearly half-past eleven, and there were few lighted windows in the long street. Roger rang the bell, and waited; rang again and knocked immediately

afterwards.

A light went on, footsteps sounded on the stairs.

The man coming was Pep Morgan, who knew Roger West well; once, had known him very well indeed. He ran a private inquiry agency, and seldom risked a clash with the police. He opened the door, a ball of a man wrapped in a thick dressing-gown. His sparse hair was awry, and his nose and mouth were screwed up in annoyance. He squeaked:

"What the hell do you want?"

"Your services," said Roger. "Fifty pounds for a job that's not worth ten."

"Who are you?"

"I'll tell you when we're inside, maybe," said Roger. He squeezed past the round ball as a woman called out from upstairs: "Pep. Who is it. Pep?"

"Just a client, m'dear, just a client." Pep closed the door and put on the light of a front room. He had bright-brown eyes, from which all traces of sleepiness had vanished. He eyed Roger closely. "I don't know you," he said.

"I hope you never will." Roger took the fifty pounds from his pocket and put it on top of a small upright piano. Pep hardly glanced towards it. "This is a simple job, there's no risk, and there's nothing illegal, but it's urgent. First thing in the morning—if you can't do it earlier!—I want you to arrange for a man on a bicycle to start from the Burlington Arcade, take the first right and then the second left—got it?"

"I'll write it down." There was a pad and pencil near the telephone. Pep's stubby fingers moved swiftly. "Yes?"

"And around there he'll find traces of flour, which was dropped from a passing car. There are more traces, in different streets, usually at corners—always at corners, except one place. That's a few doors from a house numbered twenty-seven. The

number of the house is painted in black on a cream, fluted column."

Pep wrote swiftly. "Yes?"

"I want to know the name of the street and the name of the owner of the house—just that and no more. As soon as you've got it, leave word at your office. A Mr. Brown will call you, probably about lunch-time—all he wants is that name and full address. All clear?"

"What's worth fifty quid?"

"Being hauled out of bed."

Pep rubbed his button of a nose. "Okay," he said.

* * * *

Roger went back the way he had come—through the window of the downstairs office, so that he could latch the window and lessen the risk that signs of intrusion would be noticed. He locked the passage door with the skeleton key and went quietly upstairs.

The piece of gummed paper at the foot of his door was still in one piece; so Harry hadn't realized that he had been out. He ripped it off, went in, closed the door gently, and then sat down in an easy-chair. He felt more light-hearted than he had for weeks.

Sloan could look after himself now.

Couldn't he?

CHAPTER XVIII

SLOAN

BILL SLOAN tapped his silver pencil against his strong white teeth as he skimmed through the notes he had made on what he called *The West Disappearance*. These notes were kept jealously for his eyes alone. They contained a precis of everything he had done in the past two months in his quest for Roger. They showed that he had spent every spare minute of his time on the hunt. They also showed that he had worked with Mark Lessing, but not consulted any official at the Yard. He had taken the extreme precaution of buying a diary with a lock on it. There were references to Kennedy—a name only—Kyle, Marion Day, and several others; nothing was evidence in a legal sense.

He locked the book, put it away, and pressed a bell on his desk. He shared the big office with five other D.I.'s, but none of them was in. None had seen the book.

A middle-aged man with florid face, straggly grey moustache, barrel-shaped figure, and sullen, disappointed eyes came in. He let the door slam behind him.

"Want me?" he asked gruffly as he approached the desk. He was slovenly dressed. His brown suit needed not only pressing but also cleaning. His hair needed cutting. He looked as if he thought the world was against him, and had an almost furtive expression in his cloudy blue eyes.

Sloan said : "Yes, Banister. Do you know if the Assistant Commissioner is in?"

"Yes, I know the old—yes, he's in." Banister bit on his comment, and evaded Sloan's eyes.

"Been after you again?" asked Sloan.

"He's always after me. Everyone's—oh, forget it."

“All right, that’s all,” said Sloan. He watched the sergeant go out; the door slammed again, indicating that Banister was in a foul temper. Sloan leaned back in his chair for a few minutes, forgetting the A.C. He was recalling a conversation he’d had with Roger at Roger’s Bell Street house, a week or two before the disappearance. Roger had started it.

“Happy about Banister, Bill?”

“Can anyone be ? The scales are pretty heavily weighted against him.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“What did you mean?” Sloan knew, but wanted it put into words.

“Would you trust him with much?”

“Well—I’ve no reason not to, but if I wanted anything kept right under my hat, I wouldn’t choose him to hold my hat for me.”

“That’s what I mean,” Roger had said.

The Yard was full of Roger; his face, his brisk walk, his crisp confidence, his unorthodoxy, his daring, his friendliness. Sloan owed his quick promotion to Roger; he felt lost and out on a limb ever since Roger had gone. The odd hint here, a suggestion there, a chat over a difficult case— Sloan had trained himself largely on Roger West. Admiration and respect had grown into confidence and friendship. He was probably the last man at the Yard who still believed that Roger was alive; and who believed the sun more likely to fail to rise than Roger to become corrupt.

He jumped up and hurried along to the Assistant Commissioner’s office. Had he telephoned for permission it would probably never have been granted. Chatworth seldom had time for D.I.’s except on a specific case.

Chatworth growled:

“Come in.”

“Morning, sir!” Sloan was bright and brisk.

“What do you want?” Chatworth glowered; so it was a bad moment to have chosen.

He was a big, burly man with grizzled grey hair and a shiny bald patch, a brown, tough, weather-beaten face, which in moments of affability became almost cherubic; then one could see the essential simplicity of the man. He was dressed in green homespun tweeds, and his blue collar was two sizes too large for him, his pink tie badly knotted. He looked like a farmer in a beauty salon; for the office was all chromium, glass, and tubular steel, spick and span—cold, unfriendly. No one quite knew how Chat-worth had managed to get the Office of Works to make him such an office.

“Can you spare me a few minutes, sir?”

“What about?”

“A personal matter, sir.”

“Come and sit down.” Chatworth pointed to a chair. Sloan sat in it stiffly, feeling on edge, knowing that Roger, in his place, would relax and light a cigarette and not care a hoot what the A.C. thought.

Chatworth pushed the papers away, made notes with a slim gold pencil, and looked up. The cherub in him appeared. He smiled, showing small teeth, and moved a silver cigarette-box across the black glass of his desk.

“Have a cigarette, Sloan. What’s it all about?”

“I’m scared, sir.” That was the kind of introduction Roger would have advocated as being sure to grip the A.C.’s attention. Chatworth raised a bushy eyebrow.

“Oh? What about?”

“I’ve had a warning which I think I ought to take seriously—that there is likely to be an attack on my life in the next day or two.”

“Whose corns have you been treading on?”

“It’s a long story, sir, and——”

Chatworth's eyes sparkled, and were frosty.

"Anything,to do with West?"

Roger would have expected that. Sloan hadn't. He gulped, smoke got mixed up with his larynx and he coughed and spluttered. Chatworth tapped the gold pencil on the glass top.

"Well, is it?"

"In a way, yes. I——"

"Been devoting a lot of time to West, haven't you?"

"Not official time, sir, it wasn't my job, but——"

"Spare time? A good detective shouldn't have any spare time. He should either be working or relaxing in order to equip himself for the next real job that comes along. You don't think West is dead, do you?"

"No."

"You don't think he's turned bad, do you? Or this nonsense about a split mind."

Nonsense! Sloan's eyes glowed. "No, sir, it's utter rot. There are times when I feel like—did you read the Sunday Cry yesterday?"

Chatworth said: "I prefer evidence. You know the evidence that piled up against West. Never mind—you've been ferreting on your own, you think you've unearthed something and as a result, you've been threatened. That it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Sloan said: "I'm not sure how much you want to know, sir." He meant "ought to know", and thought that Chatworth understood that. "There have been a lot of loose ends. I've worked on the theory that West uncovered something about a big organization of which we know little or nothing, and they had to get him out of the way. I don't pretend to know how they've done it, but I've a feeling that he's still alive and still working."

“Working, eh?”

“Yes. If he is alive, he’s working. It’s all vague and——”

“At least you realize that.” But there was no bite in Chatworth’s voice.

“I haven’t any evidence that West is alive, but you remember that after the Copse Cottage job, we had a squeal from someone we brought in that a man named Kennedy could explain a lot about it. We never traced the Kennedy. But I went through the records and turned up another whisper about a certain Kennedy. He was supposed to have been behind the big forgery job up north, when a man named Kyle was sentenced to seven years. I thought it would be a good idea to watch Kyle when he came out, and put a man on it—Mr. Abbott authorized that, sir.”

“Go on.”

“Kyle went to see a man named Rayner, at offices in Lyme Street, Strand. This Rayner says he made a pile in Africa and came back and bought a general commission agency. He bought it from a man named Wiseman—sorry if I have to be confusing here, sir—and Wiseman had a sleeping partner, named Kennedy. That’s a commonplace name, but it was interesting that Kyle should go to someone who had taken over a business from the Kennedy already referred to in his trial. The Kennedy is only a name —I’ve never set eyes on him, haven’t been able to pin anything on to him. I talked to Kyle myself after the visit to Lyme Street, but he said he’d gone to ask for a job, and didn’t get one. I talked to Kyle about himself, and discovered that while he was inside, his wife was killed in a street accident.”

Chatworth nodded.

“Although he seemed bitter about it, I couldn’t make him talk freely. But I did discover that one thing frightened him—the possibility that his daughter, who lives in France, should discover the truth about him. The daughter’s name was Lucille. We always

thought that a French girl was killed at Copse Cottage, if you remember."

"There are other French names," Chatworth said.

"I know, sir, but—well, remember the whisper that a Kennedy was involved both in the Copse Cottage job and West's kidnapping. We've been looking for a French girl, and among the missing people reported at our request by the Paris Sûreté there was a Lucille Dinard. Just following that line, sir, I slipped over to Paris when I had a week-end off not long ago. I discovered that this Lucille was really English, but I couldn't find out the English name she had before she went to live with this uncle and aunt in Paris. My French isn't very good, and the Sûreté man who was with me wasn't very interested. I just let it seep into my mind, sir, and watched Kyle. A month after he'd visited Rayner—the Kennedy contact—he fell under a train at Edgware Road. Someone told the police that he'd been pushed, but wouldn't swear to it at the inquest. The coroner had a lot to say about vivid imaginations, and the verdict was accidental death. Like that on Kyle's wife, some months ago. I checked, and Kyle had Rayner's telephone number on a slip of paper, as well as a name—John Pearson—and a Strand post-restante address. There was a letter containing ten pounds at the Strand Post Office, waiting for Pearson, so someone was staking him."

Chatworth rubbed his round, red nose and grunted.

"Then another queer thing happened—a girl named Marion Day was killed in a street accident. It all seemed normal enough, but I had an obsession about street accidents on this job, and spent a lot of time checking them. I couldn't cover them all, but I had a bit of luck with Marion Day. She was killed in a stretch of Kensington High Street which is usually free from accidents—I investigated all of those in the accident-free parts, it narrowed the line of inquiry. When found, she had a telephone number in her

possession—the number of the Kennedy contact whom Kyle had gone to see. That made three accidents, all connected with Kennedy. It was still vague, but I spent some time checking on this girl Day. She'd worked at a nursing home—a private asylum, really. They dealt in schizophrenic cases. The home was closed down a few days after Marion Day was killed. The doctor and staff vanished, and very little was known about them. There was no list of the staff, no record of the doctor in charge—named Ritter—in medical or surgical lists. But I spent a few odd hours up there—it's near Worcester—and managed to find an old man who'd worked in the garden. He didn't know much, never went inside the house, was paid by a member of the staff whose name he didn't know. But he told me that a Mr. Kennedy often called there until a couple of months ago—he knew, because Marion Day occasionally had a talk with him, and once or twice she'd said she was expecting Mr. Kennedy. Now, he said that Marion Day had a special patient. She took him for a walk round the garden once, and—well, the gardener wouldn't swear to it, but he thought it might be West. The gardener remembered being called away from the back garden on the occasion when he saw this patient. I showed him photographs. Slipped up, I'm afraid, sir—instead of giving him a selection to choose from, I let him see just West's. Even then, he wasn't sure, but he was sure about the name Kennedy. And this patient was at the nursing-home immediately after the Copse Cottage murder. As I've said, the nursing-home closed down after the death of Marion Day."

Chatworth grunted; that might mean anything.

"So I had another go at Rayner, tried to get him to admit that he knew Kennedy and Marion Day and Kyle. I didn't get anything out of him. I don't rate him as a bad man— that doesn't mean he isn't one, some cover it well, but I doubt if he's a professional crook. I saw him yesterday. Late last night I had a mysterious telephone

message, warning me that I was likely to meet with an accident—that rang a bell, all right!—and also giving me an interesting piece of information. The man said that if I wanted to find the identity of the Copse Cottage victim, I ought to try 23 Rue de Croix, Paris 8. That's the address of the Lucille Dinard whose relatives I went to see. As a result——"

Chatworth said heavily: "You want protection as well as official support for your line of inquiry, men to work with you, and—you'd like to carry a gun, wouldn't you?"

"That's about it, sir. I know that we've often had a lot of vague stuff like this to work on before, and I can't say that until last night I could see any reason for concentrated effort on the job, but now——"

"Who'd you want with you?"

"Detective Sergeant Peel."

"All right. Make an official report of the threat against your life, an official application to carry firearms until further notice, and see if Peel can be freed for a week. Week long enough?"

"We ought to get something by the end of it, if there's anything to get."

"All right, try."

* * * *

Peel was eight years younger than Sloan, and in appearance, might have been his brother. He was also a protégé of Roger West. He was free for the job.

* * * *

At the top of the steps, Sloan said to Peel :

"I'll go by bus to the Ritz, then walk along to Hyde Park Corner and down Grosvenor Place. You take a car and be waiting at the Ritz. Follow me. If I've been followed, I'll tip my hat on to the back of my head. Right?"

"Right." Peel was eager.

Sloan went briskly down the steps of the Yard, along past Cannon Row police-station, thence to Parliament Street. A small car, parked near Parliament Street, moved after him. It was a Morris, shabby and muddy grey, and the registration number was XA 124. Sloan boarded a bus and found a seat in a place where he could watch the road behind him. The muddy grey Morris followed. Something about it touched a chord in his memory. He rubbed his chin, and tried to think why. "Muddy" and "grey" were the words which mattered. He glanced at the *Daily Cry* which he carried—there were front-page headines about the Delaney escape from Brixton. Ah! "*The police are anxious to obtain information about a small muddy grey Austin or Morris four-seater car seen near the entrance to Brixton Jail about the time of the escape. A man was at the wheel, and a young woman passenger beside him. Information should* ____"

Sloan said aloud: "I believe in coincidence, but not in miracles!" He shrugged the suspicion aside.

The car slowed up in front of the bus when he got off. A passenger climbed out, a small, nondescript man, dressed in navy blue, wearing a trilby hat with a wide brim. Sloan walked briskly past the bus stop and along by Green Park. Chairs were dotted about the grass, a few people were strolling about beneath the watery sunlight. Traffic streamed towards Hyde Park Corner, but the muddy grey Morris stayed where it was for a few minutes, and the nondescript little man followed Sloan. Sloan tipped his hat on to the back of his head, but didn't look round to see if Peel were following: Peel would be.

Sloan passed the gates of Green Park, hesitated on the kerb and looked at the square mass of St. George's Hospital. He seemed to change his mind about crossing, and stepped out briskly down Grosvenor Place. His man and the little car also followed—the car never more than twenty yards behind him.

Quite suddenly, Sloan stepped into the road.

He had hardly touched the roadway before the engine •of the Morris roared and the car leapt forward.

CHAPTER XIX

JANET

TWENTY yards wasn't far.

Unwarned, Sloan wouldn't have stood a chance. The driver of another car, who was just pulling out to pass the Morris, jammed on his brakes and started to skid. The muddy grey Morris turned towards Sloan, but couldn't touch him without causing a crash. The driver straightened the wheel. The car didn't slow down. It flashed past Sloan, who was in front of the other car, which had stopped inches away from him. The driver, opening his door, was white with fright.

Peel's dark car flashed by.

The man in the navy-blue suit stood on the kerb for a few minutes, then suddenly turned and hurried back towards Hyde Park Corner. All he'd done was walk along the pavement, there was nothing Sloan could do about him. The driver of the car which had nearly touched Sloan shouted:

"You ruddy fool! Serve you right if you'd caught a packet. How I stopped I don't know. It's idiots like you that cause the trouble. You're lucky to be alive." The words came out in a furious spate, and Sloan straightened his coat and tried to speak, but wasn't given a chance. Passers-by joined in, all on the side of the driver.

". . . ought to be given in charge, walking across the road like that. I've a good mind——"

"Yes, sorry," said Sloan. "It was my fault." He took out his card.

"I should damn well think it was your fault. Only a fool or a drunk would do that! Don't stick your card in front of my nose." The driver waved it away.

"I thought I saw a man I was after," Sloan said. "I'm from the

Yard."

"I don't care where you come from, if—where did you say?" The scared blue eyes dropped to the card, everyone else stopped talking. "Oh, the Yard."

"Yes, I'm after a man and thought he was over here. I didn't see you coming. Sorry."

"Well——"

It was ten minutes before Sloan, transformed from villain to hero in the space of seconds, was able to get away. He took a taxi back to the Yard, and the first job he did was to write an official report of the incident, a description of the man who had left the car, and of the car itself. He made a special note: "Check with Brixton job", and then went on with routine work, on edge for a call from Peel.

The telephone bell rang.

He snatched off the receiver. "Yes?"

"Peel here," said Peel. "I'm glad you're all right, I thought you'd gone bang into the other car."

"Trail him home?"

"Yes," said Peel. "A boarding-house in Chelsea. I'm at the Chelsea Station. Better just have him watched, hadn't we?"

"Your job," said Sloan, "and keep it quiet."

"After this morning's dose, you oughtn't to travel much on your own."

"Don't worry about me," said Sloan. "You just concentrate on that man. Where's the car?"

"Outside the boarding-house."

"Ask the Chelsea people to find out where it was last night—trace the garage, everything. Muddy and grey— does that mean anything?"

"Crikey! Brixton!"

Sloan laughed; he felt on top of the world.

He was still feeling on top of the world when the telephone bell rang again. He let it ring, but it wouldn't stop. He finished a note and lifted the receiver. "Hallo . . . oh, hallo, Mark."

His voice changed, and he came off the top with a bump. Mark Lessing made him think immediately of Janet West.

"Anything?" asked Mark briefly.

"I wish there were." It was all right to use Lessing unofficially, impossible to tell him anything on this telephone, unwise to say anything that would raise Janet's hopes. "How is she?"

"Not too good," said Mark Lessing. "She's convinced that the Yard has completely forgotten about it. Anything you can do to cheer her up a bit?"

"I'll try to look in to-day," Sloan promised.

He couldn't settle to work for the next ten minutes. Visiting Janet West always hurt. He was back at the old question, too—whether to say or hint at anything that might raise her hopes.

He had lunch in the canteen. Banister sat on his own at a small table: Banister always sat on his own. He looked morose: he always looked morose. Sloan forgot him.

It was just after four o'clock when he turned into Bell Street, Chelsea. He hadn't been followed; he didn't think there was any danger for the rest of the day, they wouldn't try again so quickly; one accident was an accident, two would make coincidence: coincidences made policemen thoughtful.

He saw two small boys, racing along the street towards him, one hefty and plump and red-faced, the other smaller, thinner, with wavy hair; even from this distance the smaller child's huge blue eyes were noticeable. Both were laughing fit to burst. A young woman stood at a gate—West's gate— calling them. They ignored her. They passed the car without looking towards Sloan, the larger boy nearly up to the first and stretching out to grab his grey jersey.

"Rich-ard!" He cried breathlessly. "That's mine."

Richard was clutching something that didn't belong to him as he ran. The young woman called out again and began to hurry after them—and then Richard caught his toe in a ridge between paving stones, and crashed down. There was a moment of breathless silence, followed by a piercing howl. Sloan stopped as the woman hurried past him. She was small, big-breasted, with long, dark hair and a pale face; and her skirts were short. Richard howled wildly. Sloan looked out of the car and saw Scoopy, the elder boy, standing and watching in wide-eyed alarm; and he said:

"It wasn't my fault, Richard took it."

The woman said: "You're a bad boy, Scoopy."

Richard howled.

Sloan got out of the car and said: "Let me give him a ride, that'll make him forget it."

"No, he's cut his knee," said the woman, helping Richard up. His face had gone beetroot red, and he opened his mouth wide as he howled. The woman had dark eyes— and a way with children. She picked Richard up, and began to carry him towards the West's house. "Scoopy, walk nicely behind me. What your mother will say, I don't know."

Scoopy defended himself. "Richard took it."

Richard still had it; a small musical box, the shape of a drum, clutched in his right hand.

They trooped towards the house.

Normally, Janet West's ears were so sharp that she would have heard that outcry and rushed to see what had caused it. She may have heard it, but hadn't rushed. Sloan drove oh, and reached the house just in front of the little group. Scoopy took notice of him for the first time, and his big, broad face lit up.

"It's Mr. Sloan!"

"Hallo, Scoop. What's all the trouble about?"

"Richard wouldn't let me have my musical box." Scoopy knew

an ally when he saw one. “It is mine. Daddy bought it for me before he went away.”

“He *didn’t!”* Richard had stopped crying, and was aggressively indignant. “He didn’t, did he, G’ace? Daddy bought it for us. It was my turn.”

The woman, Grace, put him down. His knee was bleeding freely, and blood gathered at the top of his sock. She bundled both of the boys inside; Sloan followed—and saw Janet coming down the stairs. She didn’t notice him. He stood and watched her, hating the lifelessness in her eyes and face and the dullness of her voice.

“Now what have you been up to?”

“Scoopy——” began Richard.

“Richard——” began Scoopy.

“I’ll look after them, Mrs. West, it only wants a wash and a bandage. Don’t worry.” Grace smiled; she had a charming smile which lit up the whole of her face with a lightness that was almost radiance, and made her look a different woman. None of the radiance touched Janet. She stood aside, and Sloan studied her more closely.

She had often been through difficult, dangerous times, known heart-ache and desperate anxiety when Roger was on a tough assignment; but Sloan had never seen her despairing. Her expression made her look years older—drawn lines at her eyes and mouth spoiled her looks. The eyes which had so readily glowed with cheerfulness were dull. She hadn’t let herself go completely; she was tidily dressed, in a dark-grey frock, and her hair was brushed; she wore it up, Edwardian fashion.

She saw Sloan.

“Bill!” Hope blazed in her eyes—hope without foundation, hope just at seeing him. But it faded swiftly; and she closed her eyes and stood quite still as he went in.

“Hallo, Janet. How are you?”

“I’m all right,” she said. “Come in.” She led the way into the front room—the sitting-room. It was full of Roger; why not? It belonged to Roger. His chair, his pipes, his-

Janet sat down and waved to a chair, then got up.

“Will you have a drink?”

“No, thanks, it’s a bit early.”

“There isn’t any news, is there?”

“No,” said Sloan. “Not news—not hard news, Jan. But I’ve something to tell you that I hope will help a bit.”

She became rigid.

“There’s a line on the Copse Cottage job which we hadn’t found before,” he said. “It may lead to nothing, but at least , it means that Chatworth has agreed that I should spend more time on it. I had a chat with him to-day. He’s prepared to back me up, and although he didn’t say so, he’s with me in believing that the whole business is a grotesque mistake.”

“He hasn’t told me that,” said Janet.

“He won’t, unless he gets hold of something that looks like real evidence. I don’t know that I should tell you this, but at least it’s something to hold on to. I can put some official time into it, now.”

She smiled faintly. “You’ve been wonderful, Bill. You and Mark, I don’t know what I’d have done without you. But—oh, I’ve tried to tell myself that it will work out all right, but if Roger were alive, he’d have got in touch with me, somehow.”

Sloan didn’t speak—but glanced at the door. He heard a slight sound there, and thought he saw the handle turn. Scoopy liked to listen to conversations, but if it had been Scoopy he wouldn’t have come to the door so silently. Imagination ?

Janet said: “Bill, it’s no use, we just have to face the facts. Either Roger is dead or he has had something to do with—crime. That’s the only choice we have. And you know he hasn’t had

anything to do with crime, so he must be dead."

"I can't believe it."

"Have you any reason at all for saying that?"

Sloan stood up and took out his cigarettes, moved casually across the room without making a sound and without looking at the door. He said:

"No real reason, Jan. But we know the identity of the girl who was killed at Copse Cottage now, that's the line that's opened. I've left my matches in my overcoat pocket —won't be a moment."

He opened the door.

Grace was moving away, back towards him, heading for the stairs. She didn't look round. He went to his overcoat and pretended to take matches from it, returned to Janet who was leaning back with her eyes closed. She'd noticed nothing unusual.

Sloan left, three-quarters of an hour afterwards, hearing the boys shouting in their bath, and Grace talking to them cheerfully. Janet was, if anything, a little brighter. He got into his car, waved and drove towards the other end of Bell Street and then to the Chelsea Embankment. He wanted to go back to the Yard.

The woman, Grace——

A car swung out of a side turning towards him. He wasn't on guard, because he was concentrating on the woman, Grace. But his sixth sense, awareness of danger, worked as he saw the car. He wrenched the wheel. The other was a powerful Buick, big enough to crush his own car like matchwood. He felt the crash, but the Buick only hit the near-side wing. He lost control of the wheel, and his car swerved across the road. The Buick leapt along the Embankment and swung left, over the bridge.

Sloan regained control. People ran towards him. He wasn't hurt, beyond a bruise or two.

* * * *

Peel was at the Yard when he arrived, and reported that the

Chelsea police were looking after the man with the muddy grey Morris, and being ca' canny. When Sloan told him of the crash, Peel said :

"I told you so."

Sloan shrugged and said:

"Yes, we've got to keep our eyes open all the time. But it's coming to a head. Peel."

"Think so?"

"Roger West would call it a hunch. All right, call it a hunch. And here's another job, to do very carefully. Check on the nurse, Grace Howell, at the West's home."

Peel went off.

Sloan began another report; an official one, for which he didn't need his private note-book. So he didn't look for it. But he wanted the Copse Cottage murder file, and sent a constable to get it from Records. The man was gone a long time, and Sloan looked up impatiently when he came in, empty-handed.

"What's the matter—needing a rest?"

"Sorry, sir, but it's not in its place. The Assistant Commissioner had it earlier to-day—he may still have it."

Sloan said. "All right, thanks." He managed without the Copse Cottage file, and went home a little after seven o'clock.

Nothing happened to him on the way. He didn't tell his wife about the two attempts to run him down.

CHAPTER XX

KENNEDY DEMANDS

IT wasn't possible for Roger to telephone Pep Morgan that day. He was followed wherever he went, whether by a Yard man or Kennedy's, he didn't know. He preferred not to take a chance.

Next day, he wasn't watched. He didn't waste time wondering why. He had an appointment in the Strand with a manufacturer of nylon stockings, left before noon, and called Morgan from a kiosk.

* * * *

Morgan said: "Mr. Raymond Hemmingway, twenty-seven, Mountjoy Square."

"Thanks, Pep," said Roger.

As the "Pep" came out, he realized the mistake. Not many people knew the private agent as "Pep".

Morgan appeared not to notice the nickname.

"It's still dear at fifty pounds, Mr. Brown."

"I may have something else for you to do later. Not now. Thanks very much."

Roger stepped out of the kiosk, in a corner of a tobacconist's shop near Lyme Street, wiped his hot forehead, and went into the street. That had been a bad slip, his worst. By affecting not to notice it, Morgan had shown that it had registered; and Morgan would start thinking about all the people who knew him as "Pep". They were mostly Yard men or Divisional detectives, who had started to use the name when he had said the police wanted more pep; that was years ago. The danger was that Morgan might tell Sloan, Mark, or Janet.

The risk was real; he couldn't afford to relax his guard for five seconds on end.

Two or three people were passing; none showed any interest

in him. He walked the long way round back to Lyme Street; no one was watching there.

He was paying dearly for the slip, already. Morgan had probably discovered something about Mr. Raymond Hemmingway of 27 Mountjoy Square. Roger should have asked that, and also instructed Morgan to find out all he could about the man.

It wasn't certain, but it was likely, that Kennedy was really Hemmingway.

Rose was in his office when Roger arrived.

"Hallo," he said. "Anything for me?"

"I was putting the letters here for signature, sir," she said. "I'll go to lunch, now, if there's nothing you require."

"No, thanks. Suppliers remain compliant, don't they?"

"We're very fortunate, sir."

Roger smiled and nodded, and was relieved when she went out. He leaned across and took up a telephone directory. Mr. Raymond Hemmingway was shown at 27 Mount-joy Square— telephone, *Mayfair 12131*. So he'd lived at the house for some time, for this was a year-old directory. Roger took up a Directory of Directors and Who's Who, but before he opened them he began to think about the ease with which "his" firm could obtain short-supply goods. It remained a simple fact that if any kind of goods were wanted, the firm of Rayner could get them. All quite legal, all above board; the firm had priority, that was all.

Why?

It wasn't just with one or two firms; it was with practically everyone with whom they dealt. He had seen fresh evidence of it every day. Steel and steel parts were desperately short; get them from Steelers, who still traded under that name although they had come under the wing of the Board of Trade. Expensive china, which you couldn't buy in the shops except under the counter— Barry's of Stoke-on-Trent would supply as much as he wanted. Hand-woven

serge, unobtainable in all but the most exclusive tailors and dressmakers who obtained their supplies through Rayner & Co.; Rayner's bought from anyone of a dozen mills, and had no difficulty. All legal, all above board, but remarkable. There were a hundred other examples. The Scottish whisky distilleries were open-handed. Imported goods from anywhere in the world, even those which had the tiniest import quotas imaginable, came in without any trouble.

Other facts: the knowing ones in commerce, hotels, exclusive shops, and little-known organizations knew that Rayner's could obtain almost non-existent goods. The connection was extensive, and world-wide; Rayner's dealt only with the exclusive, and their amount of profit was high; but they kept scrupulously within legal margins. Whoever had built up this business had genius.

These facts had been floating around in his subconscious for some time, but he hadn't concentrated on them; it was past time he did.

Mystery number 2.

Mystery number I was Kennedy alias Raymond Hem-mingway, and he mustn't forget it. He looked up the entry under Hemmingway in Who's Who.

Hemmingway, Raymond Manville, Company director.

b. 1905, ed. Eton, Balliol, m. 1931, Desiree, daughter of Sir Robert and Lady Mortimer. Address: 27 Mountjoy Square. Clubs: Athenaeum, Carlton, Pendexeter.

That didn't give much away, except that he had had a better education than Roger had thought; you could never be sure. And that he'd married well. Roger turned up the name in the Directory o[Directors. One Company was quoted—Hemmingway, Mortimer & Company, Ltd., Dealers in Fine Art.

That might help; dealers in fine art had wonderful

opportunities for smuggling antiques, pictures, *objets d'art*, and jewellery. There was a lot of smuggling in that line to and from America, and into Great Britain from the Continent. But this company had all the hall-marks of a legitimate business.

His fingers itched for the telephone.

If he were at the Yard, he need only speak for two minutes and, by the evening, would have a complete picture of Mr. Hemmingway's business activities.

The afternoon went quickly; orders flowed in.

Just before six o'clock, the door opened. Percy appeared in his navy-blue chauffeur's uniform. He closed the door on the several members of the staff still working.

"Boss wants you," he said succinctly.

"Knock before you come in here, and go downstairs and wait," snapped Roger.

"One o' these days——" began Percy, but he didn't finish, and went out.

The door closed gently behind him.

Roger watched the door handle; it didn't turn again, Percy wasn't waiting just outside.

Roger didn't hurry. The dozen thoughts crowding his mind needed sorting out. It was easy to read too much significance into that "Boss wants you", but would Hemmingway send for him now unless it were urgent?

Careful; keep the man in mind as Kennedy, not Hemmingway; thinking of the new name might bring about another serious slip of the tongue.

The moment Kennedy suspected what was being planned, he would kill.

Roger picked up his hat and went downstairs: one difference between Charles Rayner and Roger West was that Rayner always wore a hat, and West had always gone hatless; trifles, which

mattered. He found the" Daimler waiting, and got in. The usual trick with the blinds wasn't played; they didn't go to Mountjoy Square but to a block of flats behind Oxford Street—a small, luxury block.

"Number 15," said Percy, showing no sign of grievance.

Roger nodded and went inside.

Kennedy himself opened the door. He was dressed in morning coat and striped grey trousers; he looked as if he had been poured into them. Except for his eyes, there wasn't much to remind Roger of the man he had first glimpsed coming away from Copse Cottage. Why had Kennedy appeared in person in that job?

The flat was small, but the living-room was big and luxurious. It struck him as being a woman's fiat. Drinks were out, which didn't suggest a fiery interview.

Roger said: "Another little pied a terre."

"I hope you like it. What will you drink?"

"Whisky, thanks."

Kennedy poured out, offered cigarettes, and for him was a long time getting to the point. He sipped, and eyed Roger through his lashes, as if he wanted to hide those glittering eyes.

"Your friend Sloan is tough," he said.

Roger stiffened. "I told you——"

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about," said Kennedy mildly. "You've forgotten to forget your past. You've too much of a conscience. Sloan is tough, and Sloan isn't a fool. He's got to go. Two attempts were made on him yesterday. Both failed. I don't know whether he suspects what happened or not, but he might, and he's not safe."

Roger said: "I won't stand for it."

Kennedy laughed.

"Won't you?" He turned to a table, picked up a photograph that was lying face downwards, handed it to Roger. "Recognize

them?"

Two smiling faces and one grave, stared up at him. Scoopy and Richard, dressed in Red Indian finery—and a girl whom he didn't know, small, big-breasted, wearing a skirt much too short for her. He didn't spend any time looking at the girl at first, just stared at the boys. Wearing those feathers and waistcoats was one of their great joys.

His teeth clamped together.

Kennedy said: "I've told you before that I don't want to injure the kids, but you've got to understand that they don't belong to you any more—and that any of your onetime friends who get in our way, have to go. Sloan's one. I can lift up the telephone, and give orders to that girl to walk out of the house taking the kids with her. How would a certain widow like that?"

Roger felt sick.

Kennedy said: "I hoped you'd got past the worst stage. Rayner." He turned from the drinks, went to the window and stood looking out. "I think you have—this is just a sentimental hangover. Sloan only spells danger to you. Don't you enjoy your new standard of living?"

Roger said: "It has its points."

"You can become a much richer man. You can do what you like and go where you like. I haven't wasted my time when having you watched. This new life fits you like a glove. All you nave to do is forget, and everything is yours."

Roger said: "I've warned you not to do anything to Sloan. The fact that he was a friend of mine is one thing. There's much more. He's bristling with suspicion. Do anything to him, and you'll have the Yard down on you like a pack of hounds—and I mean like a pack of hounds. They'll tear you to pieces, strip you of everything. This place. Your home. Your money. Your future. You're a fool if you go for Sloan."

Kennedy said: “He’s got to go, soon.” He moved to a writing-desk, a beautiful walnut piece, and picked up a book, a large diary with a lock and key. “Recognize this?”

Roger gulped.

“Sloan’s note-book?”

“He’s done a lot of ferreting. He’s proved you’re right —the police are better than I’d realized. If he talks about this, it might be very bad indeed. Yes, Sloan has to go.”

“So Banister——”

“Banister was exactly the right man. He’s done this kind of thing before, on a smaller scale. I’ve had dossiers and records photolithoed this afternoon, and know everything that the Yard knows. You’ll study it, point out the weakness and the strength, and decide how best to counter what they’re doing. But there’s nothing in those records half as dangerous as Sloan’s private note-book. Sloan must go.”

Roger helped himself to another whisky and soda.

“Have you been working long enough now to know how valuable you are to me?” Kennedy demanded.

“I’ve an idea.”

“We’ve hardly started.” Kennedy grinned. “When we get at the big stuff, you’ll wallow in money. Where does Sloan live?”

“You won’t get Sloan’s address from me.” Keep calm. “If you want to get yourself hanged, send one of your thugs to find out where he lives—they can follow him home. Do the job your own way, and don’t blame me.”

Kennedy looked at the amber liquid in his glass.

“Supposing Sloan were to disappear?” he said. “It would have a different effect, wouldn’t it? Sloan was such a good friend of yours. Sloan disappearing would seem almost a natural consequence. And if it happened together with the disappearance of confidential documents, your other friends there would add two

and two. Sloan took the papers. Banister would remain at the Yard, able to serve us again. Do you like the build-up. West?"

Roger knew that "West" wasn't a slip.

"You might get away with it," he said.

"That's condescending of you. I'd have two of the brightest men at the Yard under my wing, and the Home Office would begin to worry. Corruption at Scotland Yard is a bad thing, isn't it? Afterwards, we might get one or two others to join us. I can imagine this doing a lot of damage at the Yard, but never mind that for now—just concentrate on getting hold of Sloan. There's one simple way of doing it: speaking to him in your natural voice. He'd come running, wouldn't he?"

Roger said slowly: "Yes."

"I want him," said Kennedy.

"When?" The word was dragged out of Roger.

"To-night. Well—to-morrow at the latest."

"Where?"

"At your office. That will——"

"He suspects me as Rayner. He'd smell a rat if he had the address. What's the matter with bringing him here?"

"All right, bring him here," said Kennedy. "Number 15 Balling Mansions, Wild Street." He made the decision quickly. "When you've got him, Percy will inform me.

No tricks. West. And when it's done——" he paused, looked round. "Nice flat, isn't it?"

"It's all right."

"Yours. With everything that's in it. Everything you want, anyhow." Kennedy laughed: that hateful laugh. "Stay and think it over. I'll see you later. Don't put that picture in your pocket by mistake, will you?"

He had propped the photograph up against a book-end; the two boys smiled gaily, and the dark-haired woman looked across at

him sombrely.

* * * *

Kennedy was clever; Kennedy knew that this was a crisis, and wasn't sure which way the cat would jump. So he had increased the pressure. He had also increased Roger's determination to find out what lay behind it all— to guess at that "big future". Get one thing straight, thought Roger; Kennedy was in big crime and mostly unsuspected crime. It had something to do with those short-supply goods; with the forgery racket which Kyle had helped to run; with the currency smuggling. One could spend a lifetime at Scotland Yard and scoff at stories of master crooks, but such men existed—and most of them worked without the police knowing. Kennedy—as Hemmingway—had kept himself completely free from suspicion. But in a show like this, you had to have records, you couldn't keep them all in your mind. So Kennedy had records, and there was an even chance that they were at 27 Mountjoy Square.

Roger could spend a lot of time thinking of that and beg the most urgent issue—how to handle Sloan, or the situation which Kennedy had created with Sloan. One thing stuck out a mile: if Sloan disappeared, then everyone at the Yard would assume that he had been in a racket with Roger, and had gone to join him. Beyond all this there was the vague hint from Kennedy that the Yard could be split from top to bottom with corruption. It had happened before; not recently, but not so long ago that it didn't make old Yard men sore whenever it was mentioned. If a man could control a large number of officers at the Yard, he would be in a perfect position to handle any crime, any racket that he wanted. The Yard's tentacles spread far and wide—but he was letting his thoughts run away with him. He had to get down to earth; decide what to do about Bill Sloan.

He heard the door open.

A woman came in.

* * * *

She came in and closed the door softly, smiling at him as she approached. Hex movements were easy and smooth. She was tall, and no one would ever complain about her figure. She wore an afternoon dress, obviously a model, of dark green and pale yellow. Her hair was auburn, and she had fine, grey-green eyes. Her voice, unlike Mrs. Delaney's, was husky and pleasing.

"May I have a drink?"

He took a grip on himself. "What will it be?"

"Gin and vermouth, please."

He mixed the drinks. Her fingers were long and slender, pale, with pink nails; she wore a single diamond ring on her right hand, but no other jewellery.

"You look thoughtful, Charles," she said.

"There's plenty to think about."

"Too much. Here's success!" She sipped. "And everything you want. It is a pleasant flat."

"So you've heard about that."

"He told me. It's my flat. I go with it."

"I'm a bachelor by habit," Roger told her.

"I know all about you," she said. "You're eating your heart out. I can see it in your eyes. I've told him that it was essential for you to have—companionship. There's nothing that helps one to forget so much as someone else to think about. Has that ever struck you? When your wife reaches the same point, she'll get better. You think it's a tragedy. It's happened to millions of people, and they've lived happy, contented lives afterwards. This sentimental illusion about one woman for one man is just nonsense. You ought to realize that."

"So I'm eating my heart out, and you're going to stop me," he said, sardonically.

"I'm going to try, because I don't want the unpleasant things

to happen. After all, you can look after your wife, if you want to."

This was a new angle—different pressure. He stared at her, the question in his eyes.

"With money," she said.

"I just post a package of money to her, do I?"

"The worst of men when they're in trouble is that they get childish," she said. "Come and sit down." She went to a couch and smoothed her skirts and adjusted a cushion.

He moved to the couch and sat on the arm.

"Help me to grow up," he invited.

"I want to help you. You're an attractive man, and you're wealthy, or on the way to being wealthy. You're quite young. You've been taken up by a man who is exceptional, and who will have very great influence before he's finished—a kind of genius."

Did she know much about Kennedy ?

"What makes you think he's as good as that?"

"Ray is my brother," she said. "I've never known him make a serious mistake yet. One or two of his friends thought that it was a mistake to try to use you, but—it hasn't been, and if you're sensible, it won't be. He's quite merciless—that is one of the things that makes him so unusual. He will one day be the richest man in England." She spoke without any hint of doubt.

"A remarkable man," Roger said heavily. "He has a small army of thugs, hasn't he?"

"Practically none," said the woman in green. "He has a lot of influence with some, and he can always find men to do what he wants. They don't know that their orders come from him. Some of them get caught, like Kyle, but it makes no difference to him. There's no way of tracing those things back to him. They can only be traced back to a certain Mr. Kennedy, who doesn't exist."

Roger slid from the arm to the couch itself, crossed his legs and looked at her levelly. There wasn't anything the matter with

her, except her outlook.

She smiled.

"What is more, if you were to see him as he really is, you wouldn't be able to say for sure that you know him. You're a smart man, Charles, and you're good. Haven't you marvelled that he showed himself to you?"

"It had crossed my mind."

She stretched out her hand, so that it lay near his, palm upwards, slim and white and inviting.

"I think he was right," she said dreamily. "He felt that using you was the most important step he had ever taken. It opened a host of new possibilities, and he had to make sure that it was successful. He couldn't trust anyone else to deal with you—not even me." She laughed easily, at herself; and laughter came naturally to her. "He is a fine judge of character. I often think he can read what is passing through your mind. Is it silly fancy? Look at to-night. He judged your reaction to Sloan perfectly. He knows that if you can jump this hurdle, everything will be fine in the future. He's naturally very anxious that you should jump it."

"And you're to help me?"

"That's right," she said, and leaned nearer, taking his hand. "I'm to help you. I'm to show you the real future, to make you understand what it can be. Have you ever been poor?"

"Poor enough."

"Not *really* poor? Poor enough to be hungry, to wonder where the next meal is coming from, to wonder whether your clothes will hold together for another day, to wonder where you can get new ones, something to keep you from shivering? Have you ever been poor, like that?"

"No," he said; the word came out abruptly.

"I wish you had. If you had, you would understand so much more easily. We have. Ray thinks he's forgotten those days, but he

hasn't. It was because of them that he turned his brilliant mind to this. We've touched the depths, and now we're touching the heights. There is nothing money can't buy, Charles. Beauty, lovely things, travel, comfort, luxury—everything but life itself, and we start with that. Ray hated the old days and loves the new. He's very generous. You know that. Hasn't he been generous with you? Is there anything you lack?" Roger said: "No."

She raised his hand, held it close to her, pressed gently— so gently.

"You either have to go on doing what he wants—and what you will want eventually—or you will be killed. But the others will suffer so much, if you die. He might take your children away from their mother; that would really be cruel. She would have no idea where they were and wouldn't have a moment's rest. Think of it. And somehow he would make sure that she would spend the rest of her life in poverty. He can. Your friends, too—this man Lessing. Sloan—they would all be on his list, marked down, treated so cruelly. Yes, he can be cruel, and has to be in order to obtain what he wants. What happens to them is in your hands, Charles. Wouldn't it be foolish to take risks?" Then, she added: "You have so much."

She closed her eyes; and her lips were very close to his.

He kissed her.

* * * *

"You'll send for Sloan?" she said quietly. He was standing by the cocktail cabinet, smoothing down his ruffled hair.

"Yes."

"To-night?"

"If two attacks have been made on him, he isn't likely to come at a mysterious summons after dark. He'd take the risk in daylight."

"He must come by himself."

“I can’t guarantee what he’ll do.” Roger poured drinks; champagne, which fizzed and bubbled and sparkled. His hands weren’t as steady as he would have liked.

The door opened, and Kennedy came in. His eyes were narrowed, there was the merest sliver of silver light in them. He grinned.

“What do I hear?”

Roger saw the flashing glance which she sent him, and read the triumph in it.

“Charles is going to send for Sloan,” she said, “and he’s made several suggestions . . .”

* * * *

“Good night,” Kennedy said, at the door.

Percy stood by the Daimler, outside.

“Good night.”

“I’ll see that you have the address for Sloan, early in the morning.”

“Thanks.” Roger hurried out to the car, Percy opened the door and looked at him without favour. Percy was never likely to become a good friend of Charles Rayner, there was instinctive animosity in him.

“I’ll walk,” said Roger.

“You won’t!” Percy snapped.

Roger turned away from the car and walked towards the end of the street. He couldn’t see Percy; guessed that Percy was sending an SOS to Kennedy, who was probably still at the door. At the corner, Roger turned. A man came out of the block of flats, walking swiftly, and turned in his wake. Roger affected not to notice him, and strolled on. It was a warm, friendly London night. He dawdled. The man who had come from the Mansions also dawdled, a little way behind him. He was still being followed when he reached Lyme Street, twenty minutes later. He stood at the doorway, lit a

cigarette, and looked up and down; his shadower stayed in the doorway of a shop at the corner, appearing to take no notice of him.

Roger went upstairs, leaving the street door unlatched.

When he pulled aside the curtains and looked out of a front window the man was opposite.

Harry, quiet and unobtrusive as ever, asked if he wanted dinner.

"A snack will do."

"Very good, sir." Harry went into the kitchen. Roger put on some records; Wagner—Wagner suited his mood, the melancholy made a background to his thoughts. They were fragmentary. The clever cunning of it! The sugar coating over crudeness. The continued attempts to break down his resistance and corrupt his mind. Whether he got Sloan or not was to be a vital test; Kennedy might regard it as final. Succeed, and he would be close to the black heart of this affair; fail, and the woman in green—he did not even know her Christian name—would be able to say : "I told you so." No use arguing with himself about that. Succeed, and Kennedy would lower most of the barriers. Fail—and die.

Fail—and take terrible risks with Janet and the boys.

He stirred in his chair, smoking, restless.

The woman in green was now with Kennedy, sure of herself, yet human and prone to mistakes. She had started to tell him what they were going to do that night and had broken off; and it was obvious that they were going out of town. Kennedy's wife would probably be with them; Percy would almost certainly drive them. They probably wouldn't be back that night. Kennedy was away from Mountjoy Square, then; and Percy, too. Kennedy's wife? He couldn't guess.

Kennedy was sure that he didn't know the address at Mountjoy Square.

Kennedy and his sister were now sure that he would “play”; the shadow and this caution was routine. It was too big a thing on which to take a chance. He would be watched, everything he did until Sloan was caught would be noted, he had no real freedom of action, unless he took a desperate chance.

It would be the only chance, leading either to complete success or abject failure. It meant breaking into 27 Mountjoy Square. He’d need a skilled cracksman; he could find one, if necessary. He laughed-

If he held on, sent for Sloan and trapped him, then afterwards success would be much easier. On balance, he ought to wait; he’d gone so far, and Sloan would be the last man in the world to blame him for going on. Sloan was one of the few who would really understand what he had been doing, but—there was one incalculable factor.

If he caught Sloan, what would Kennedy do?

Use the other Yard man? Or kill him?

Could Kennedy use Sloan successfully? Hadn’t he all that he wanted, already?

Roger stood up suddenly. “He’ll kill——” he began.

The door from the kitchen opened silently, and Harry came in with a tray.

“Did you speak, sir?” His sallow face was expressionless.

“Talking to myself. I’m too much on my own, Harry!”

“That has been my opinion for some time, if I may say so, sir.” Harry put down the tray, took a silver-plated lid off a dish of mixed grill. “That is the best I can do at such short notice, Mr. West.”

He drew back; his doleful brown eyes had an unusual glow. He seemed to come alive. And by saying “West” he had flung a verbal hand grenade.

Roger said slowly: “I don’t think I heard you.”

“I think you did, sir.”

Keep calm.

"How much do you know about this, Harry?"

"A little, sir." He was solemn again, the glow had gone, but there was something in him which hadn't been there before. "Also, I have had my instructions to report on your movements and your telephone calls while at the flat, sir. I have duly carried out my duties. Except——" he paused.

This was a form of torment. It was impossible to know what was in his mind; Roger felt as if he were in the midst of a furious explosion, but Harry's voice was so quiet. He'd known the man for nearly two months, and studied him. All he'd seen was a well-trained automaton, obeying orders with smooth precision, never obtruding, always at hand.

Now, he was a man; a human being primed with dangerous knowledge.

"Except what?" Roger held the arms of his chair tightly.

Harry gulped; he had screwed himself up for this—yes, he was frightened. Tension, springing out of nowhere, was brittle and dangerous.

"When you went out the other night, sir."

Roger didn't speak, but thought of the dictaphone he knew was hidden in this room. He'd never located it; it had been wiser to leave it untouched, and guide all conversation into channels which Kennedy could safely hear. He couldn't control this conversation.

"I saw the brown paper at the door, and that told me you had gone—I thought I heard you," said Harry. "But I didn't report to Mr. Briggs."

"To whom?"

"Mr. Briggs—Percy, sir. Percy is the man to whom I have had to make all my reports."

"I see. And why didn't you inform him?"

"I weighed everything up and decided that it wouldn't be in

the best interests," said Harry. He formed every word carefully, had to force it out, because of his fears. Of what? Of Roger's reaction, when he knew the truth? Was this—blackmail? The word seemed to scream at Roger.

Harry was a crook, and must be a professional, or he wouldn't have this job; Harry had a stranglehold over his "boss". Roger stood quite still, watching his composure break now. The grill stood on the table, getting cold. Harry seemed to shrink, yet there was a form of courage in him. He licked his lips before he spoke again.

"You see, sir——"

No, he couldn't get it out.

Roger said slowly, forcing down his rage. "All right, Harry. Let's have it. How much do you want?"

Harry raised his hands, a swift, startled gesture. "Want? It's not blackmail, I wouldn't put on the black, it's——"

The front-door bell rang.

CHAPTER XXI

INTO THE PARLOUR

HARRY jumped, as if someone had kicked him, and darted a glance over his shoulder.

Roger said: “Never mind that. If it’s not blackmail, what is it?”

“I—I think I had better see who that is,” said Harry. The ringing had made him turn pale, his hands weren’t steady. “It might be Mr. Briggs.”

Roger grabbed his arm.

“Forget it. What——”

Harry pulled himself free and hurried to the door. Short of grappling with him, which would probably be heard outside, there was nothing Roger could do. He watched the man’s thin back and sloping shoulders as he opened the door of the tiny hall. He heard the outer door (opening. He looked round the room, in a despairing effort to locate the dictaphone; he was reduced to despairing efforts. He heard a man’s deep voice :

“All right, I know he’s in.”

It was Sloan.

“Really, sir.” Harry’s voice rose in. a protesting squeak. “Mr. Rayner is just having——”

Sloan filled the doorway.

Roger said evenly: “Getting tough?”

“I’m always tough when I’m in a hurry, and I’m in a hurry now. Is there a place where your man can go without hearing us?”

Harry’s eyes became cloudy again.

“Kitchen, Harry,” said Roger. He might have said: “Kennel, Fido,” and meant the same thing and had the same effect.

Harry went off, hurriedly, and closed the door leading to the kitchen. Sloan went across to it and turned the key in the lock. He

looked very big, powerful, and aggressive.

Roger said: “I don’t know that I like you in this mood, Inspector.”

“Forget I’m a policeman. Did you telephone me on Sunday night?” Sloan was in an angrily aggressive mood.

There was a dictaphone, taking all this down.

“I did not.”

“I want the truth, Rayner.”

“Why don’t you ask your friend Kennedy?”

“Don’t be smart. After I came to see you, I was twice run down. Nearly run down. They were murder attempts. They came immediately after I’d called to see you. I’m giving you a chance to save yourself from trouble. Did you telephone me?”

“No.”

Sloan said: “So you fixed those attacks.”

“You’re crazy.”

“We’ll see.” Sloan moved across the room. He had his right hand in his pocket, holding something which made a considerable bulge; the kind of bulge that a gun would make. If a Yard man had reason to suspect that his life was in danger, he could get authority to carry a gun. There was something new in Sloan’s expression, as if he felt sure he could force a showdown, and meant to.

Roger said : “Calm down. Have a drink.”

“I’ve finished drinking with killers.”

“All right, please yourself. Mind if I get on with my supper?” Roger sat down and picked up a knife and fork.

“Where have you been to-night?”

“Out.”

“Don’t evade my questions. Where have you been?”

“Continuing my experiments in romance. Auburn, this time, and very sophisticated. I don’t think she would be quite your type.”

“Don’t you ? Not the type you had with you on Sunday

night?"

An alarm bell seemed to ring in Roger's head. He cut into a kidney and put it to his mouth; it wasn't the easiest thing in the world to keep steady.

"No, not the same type at all. The first was a sweet little innocent animal, didn't I tell you? There was nothing innocent about this one, and I don't know that you could call her sweet."

"What was the name of the girl you were out with on Sunday?"

"Doris."

"Doris what?"

"That's as far as was necessary."

"Where did you take her?"

"I didn't. She took me. A pleasant little two-roomed flat. She was very sweet." He ate some bacon and toast; it nearly choked him.

"You're lying. You took her out in a car."

"Have it your own way."

"The car was a Morris. Colour, grey. It was muddy because it had done a lot of country running and hadn't been washed down. It's still muddy. You took her out in it—let's have the truth, Rayner."

"I haven't a car."

"This one was lent to you."

Roger finished his mouthful, and leaned back.

"I didn't go out in any car on Sunday night. I spent the evening with Doris, and came back here in time to have a talk with you. Remember? If I wanted to hire a car, it wouldn't be a poky Morris."

Sloan took a step forward and grinned into his face.

"A poky Morris, is it? How did you know the size of that car, Mister Rayner."

Roger would never feel contemptuous about a crook who made a simple slip again. But he laughed.

"When I think of Morris's, I also think of size eights. I still wish that I knew what's under your skin."

Sloan said: "You will. We've picked up your Doris."

"Really? What's she done? I didn't know that she was a crook in her spare time. I—oh, she's a pro, is she ? Pity."

"She's a girl who lives on the fringe of a small East London gang. You know the gang—Myers runs it. She was in that muddy Morris outside Brixton Jail on Sunday night. You were with her."

Roger said: "Well, well! Did she say so?"

"You were with her."

"At her flat. If she's said anything different, she was out with another man after I left her. That was quite early, remember. She ____"

Sloan took out his gun—an automatic. He held it pointing towards Roger. He was a Scotland Yard Officer, and a Yard Officer never used a gun to threaten, or hardly ever. He used a gun in self-defence only, and there was no reason for self-defence here. Sloan was going too far, and the glitter in Sloan's eyes suggested that he wasn't himself. There was a dictaphone too, and it was at least possible that the watcher across the road had telephoned to report Sloan's arrival. If so, others might come to collect the fly that had walked into Roger's parlour.

"Let's have the truth," growled Sloan. "Go back a bit, Rayner. You killed West. All the rest is unimportant. You killed West. I may not be able to pin it on to you, but I've promised myself that I shall kill the man who killed West. I can shoot you in self-defence and get away with it." His voice was low-pitched, he wasn't so far beside himself that he risked Harry hearing the conversation. Could he mean this? Was it just bluff? All the experience of years told Roger that it was bluff, but he had never before seen Sloan in a

savage, unreasoning mood like this. There was something more than the suspicion about the little grey car burning in Sloan.

Roger said: “I did not kill West. I have not killed anyone. I was not out in a grey Morris on Sunday night.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“All right, get on with your romancing. I’m hungry.” Roger turned to the mixed grill. It was cold, the fat had congealed on the plate. Sloan towered over him.

He said slowly, deliberately: “West’s body was found this morning. Until then, I wasn’t sure that he was dead. Now I know. Now I know that you killed him. But there are others, higher up than you. Kennedy—others. Let’s have the truth, Rayner. Give me the story, and the other names, and I’ll let you take your rap for the Brixton job and forget the rest. Keep it to yourself, and——”

He wasn’t even consistent.

Take it one at a time, and quickly. Kennedy’s sister had said that Janet could be “looked after” with a big insurance about which she had known nothing; that had been a strong hint that plans were in the making to produce his “body”. Sloan had jumped to the conclusions; but Sloan wasn’t in a normal mood.

Roger heard a car pull up, outside. Percy? Or men summoned by the man across the road?

“You can’t make me take a rap for a job I didn’t do,” he said. “You’ve got the wrong end of the stick, Sloan. Put that gun away and be sensible. How do you know your friend West is dead?”

“His body was found. He’d been drowned. Face battered, fingers amputated, all the usual tricks to prevent identification, but they made a mistake. You made a mistake. You fools always make one. West had a scar or two which served as identification. I saw the body myself. I’ve seen those scars myself. I’ve seen them before —I was with West when he was wounded, and got one of them.”

Brilliantly clever; they had even scarred a man, so that the

identification would be to the satisfaction of the police. And Janet—did Janet know? He felt a desperate surge of anxiety, he had never been nearer telling Sloan the truth. But he daren't, yet. He heard a sound, metal on metal; a key was being inserted in the lock of the outer door.

Sloan didn't seem to hear it.

"I'm sorry about West," Roger said. He felt sick—did Janet know? "If this girl Doris told you that I was with her in the car on Sunday night, she lied."

Sloan thrust the gun forward.

"I'll give you half a minute," he said. His eyes glared, all finesse had gone, but even now it must be bluff.

The door of the hall opened softly. Sloan had his back to it.

"I mean it, Rayner."

"Oh, no, you don't."

A man slid into the room, gun in hand, and spoke. Sloan spun round. The man at the door fired. The bullet smacked into Sloan's gun and wrenched it out of his hand. It dropped to the floor, between him and the gunman, who moved forward swiftly and kicked it away. Two other men came in swiftly. Both had guns.

Sloan drew back. "Get out. Get——"

They approached, remorselessly.

Roger screwed himself up. If the order had gone out, "Kill Sloan", then they'd shoot again, whether Sloan took this lying down, or put up a fight. But if they had orders to kill, would the man have shot the gun out of Sloan's grasp? Wouldn't he have killed him with that first shot?

Sloan said: "Get away."

"Don't try any rough stuff, Sloan," said the man with the gun. He was small, thin, evil-faced: evil because of his grin. Roger knew him slightly, as one of the most corrupt and vicious East End gangsters, a race-gang type, and one of Oily Joe's mob. His name

was Myers. He took another step forward, the gun still raised.

A third man came in.

Sloan said : “Get—away.”

And then he jumped——

Roger shot out his foot. Sloan kicked against it and went sprawling as the gunman squeezed the trigger. The bullet spat out, the sharp crack echoed. The bullet buried itself in the wall, and Sloan sprawled forward, unhurt. The two men from “behind the gunman pounced; wolves couldn’t have moved quicker. Before Sloan could save himself, he was manacled with regulation handcuffs.

Sloan suddenly became still.

Myers grinned at Roger. “Saved a lot o’ trouble, ain’t it? Okay, get him out.” He nodded to the others, who dragged Sloan towards the door, and at the doorway hoisted him between them so that they could carry him downstairs. He disappeared, and he was alive: they’d gone to a lot of trouble to keep him alive.

The thin-faced man said : “All okay?”

“That made a lot of noise,” Roger said.

“Nice and quiet up here. You don’t have to worry. If anyfink was ‘eard, we’ll fix it. So long.” Myers swaggered out of the room and closed the door behind him. The footsteps on the stairs sounded loud as the other men carried Sloan.

* * * *

He didn’t know how long he sat there before he heard the tapping. At first, he hardly noticed it, but it continued so persistently that he raised his head and looked about him. It came from the kitchen door—Harry, of course. He had forgotten Harry, forgotten his urgency when Harry had gone to open the door to let Sloan in.

He went across the room and turned the key.

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry. He didn’t look any less

frightened. “I was afraid that you might get hurt.”

“What else are you afraid of?”

“I—I don’t think I’m afraid of anything, sir. I spoke out of turn. I’m sorry your supper was spoiled. Shall I prepare something else ? I will gladly——”

“Do you know where the dictaphone is in the flat?”

Harry gulped. “I’ve disconnected it, sir. I did that before I spoke in the first place.”

Roger said abruptly: “Get me a whisky. Help yourself to what you want. Then come and sit down.” He wasn’t sure that these were good tactics; one man would be more at ease with drink and in a chair; another would feel acute embarrassment. Harry had poured himself out a beer, in a glass tankard. Roger gave him a cigarette.

“Thank you, sir.”

They lit up.

“If it’s not blackmail, what is it?”

The fear was there, hovering in Harry’s eyes, but the new situation had given him confidence, and his voice was steady as he answered :

“I’ve noticed a lot while I’ve been here, Mr. West. One day before you arrived a lady came asking for you. I was here, fixing the place up. A Miss Day, she was. Miss Marion Day. I noticed in the papers what happened to her afterwards. It was from her I got an idea who you really were, sir. And I—I was a friend of Ginger Kyle’s. Very good friends we were in our young days. We got mixed up with the same bunch. I’m not pleading innocence, sir. We went into it with our eyes open, and we knew the risk we was taking. I was lucky—I’ve never bin inside. Made a little packet, and if it wasn’t for—for pressure, Mr. West, I would be retired now. Ginger ought to have had a nice little pile waiting for him when he came out. Instead o’ that, they didn’t look after him. They killed his wife, or he thought they did. And when they killed him—I can’t help it,

Mr. West. If I've judged you wrong, I'm for it. I'll take my chance, same as Ginger did. And others. But it seemed to me you slipped out the other night so's they shouldn't know, and you wasn't working with them wholehearted. Are you, sir? If you are, then okay, I'm for it. If you're not, if you're against them—I'll help if I can. My word on it, Mr. West."

He sat back. His forehead and long upper lip were beaded with sweat, and that cloudy fear hovered in his eyes.

But—was that put on?

Was this another of Kennedy's trick tests?

CHAPTER XXII

27 MOUNTJOY SQUARE

ROGER could tell Harry the truth; and Harry might send word to Percy, and so bring about the end of it all.

He could be non-committal; but if Harry were still spying on him, that would be as damning.

He could reject the offer, report to Percy—and if it were genuine, damn Harry, send Harry to his death. You slid into accepting that as a fact. You didn't tell yourself that no one would kill as freely and as ruthlessly as Kennedy; you knew that it was true. The man was completely amoral, he didn't regard killing as most men did. It was necessary, it was done—an obstacle removed, like a chalk mark wiped off a blackboard and leaving only a smear as trace.

Harry stirred in his chair and stubbed out his cigarette.

Roger said: "Where do you report, Harry?"

"To Percy, sir."

"Yes. Where?"

"I have a telephone number. There is another way of communicating, also—through the men who sometimes are on duty outside. No doubt you've noticed them—I saw you looking out of the window to-night. There was one there. I always assume that when there is a special job on, they take extra care because they aren't sure of you yet. I hope they never will be, sir. It's a dirty business—it stinks. I've done a lot of things in my life, but murder—I'm scared. I don't mind admitting I'm scared. But I've taken a chance, and I hope it's justified."

"Don't you know where Percy lives?"

"No, sir."

"Kennedy?"

“I’ve heard the name, that’s all, and I think he’s called here once or twice, but when he’s been coming, I’ve had orders to keep out of the way.”

“How do you get your instructions?”

“From Percy, sir.”

“And he blackmails you into obeying?”

“That’s right.”

“What jobs have you done?” Roger asked.

Harry put down the empty tankard and half-closed his eyes.

“Safes, mostly, sir. And breaking and entering, more lately. One of the places I went to, an old man was killed. I didn’t do it, but Percy says he can pin it on me. I don’t doubt he can. I get well paid for this, I didn’t see any reason why I shouldn’t do what I was told. You were just another dope. But after Miss Day and Ginger was bumped off—I couldn’t settle. There’s some things you can take, and there’s others that you just can’t swallow, and coldblooded murder’s a thing I can’t swallow.”

Roger wanted a cracksman. He said: “Have you got any burglar’s tools here?”

Harry’s eyes opened wide.

“Well——”

“Good, up-to-date stuff, not just a jemmy and a screwdriver.”

“I haven’t got any here, but I know where I could lay me hands on some.” Harry was puzzled yet eager.

“Will you take a big risk?”

“Nothing much to lose, now,” said Harry, and his face became more animated, a little colour glowed in his cheeks. “So I was right, you’ve been putting one across Percy and his boss.”

“That’s right, Harry.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and gave a little, satisfied smile. There was no gloating in it, but much relief.

* * * *

Roger stood in the doorway and looked across Lyme Street. The guard was still there. He himself was in the shadows, and the man couldn't see him. He saw the other put his hands to his pocket and take out a packet of cigarettes; a moment later, a match flared. The man moved out of his doorway and strolled along the street—and Roger moved forward, but drew back suddenly. A policeman had turned the corner and was walking along, that was why the guard had moved. The guard crossed the road and stood outside a small cafe which was still open; a man, looking into a cafe and studying the menu card in the window, wasn't going to attract much attention. He peered along the street. The policeman passed him. The guard waited until the policeman had turned the next corner, and then went back to his usual stand. Roger moved again, quickly. He saw the man stiffen. He crossed the road, but didn't look at the man—whose job it was to report, and perhaps to follow. He walked towards the dark dingi-ness of the market lanes and alleys, and the man followed him. He slipped round a corner; it was very dark here. He heard the man hurrying after him, and knew when he was at the corner.

The man turned.

Roger grabbed him by the neck, stilling a cry, drove a fierce punch into his stomach, let him go, then struck at his chin. Two blows knocked the man out. No one was here, the policeman was out of sight. Roger dragged the unconscious man across the bumpy, cobbled road, into a narrow alley leading towards the main, covered market. He took out a length of cord, bound the man's ankles and wrists, dragged him farther—into a little alcove—and stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth. Then he dragged him, by his coat collar, and saw a dark pile of empty wooden crates. He shifted some of the crates, dumped the man behind them, and put them back into position. He wouldn't be found until those crates were moved, and that wouldn't be for several hours, at least.

He went back to Lyme Street.

Harry came out of the doorway. “All okay, sir?”

“Yes. Get a move on.”

“I had to see this through,” said Harry. “See you at the Burlington Gardens end of Burlington Arcade in about an hour, then. It’s just on eleven—I ought to be there by midnight.”

“Fine.”

Harry turned and hurried towards the Strand and a taxi.

Roger had an hour to kill.

* * * *

There had never been a longer sixty minutes. He walked to Burlington Arcade, and his mind wouldn’t stop working, weighing up his chances; especially those against him. Kennedy would have his home well protected. Kennedy, as Hemmingway, wouldn’t be likely to keep the records at the home where he was so safe. Harry might fail him. Harry might get cold feet. Harry might have fooled him. Death didn’t take long. A man might come towards him, walking, or in a car—and shoot just once.

Roger walked along to Bond Street and towards Oxford Street. There were few people about, and most of those who were came from the AEolian Hall, where they took the overflow from Broadcasting House. Taxis passed. A sleek car came from Oxford Street and slowed down as it drew near him. It was ten minutes to twelve. He turned his face towards the car, prepared to spring to one side if the driver or the passenger moved. The car passed.

Roger walked back towards the end of the Arcade. It was a warm night, but he didn’t feel warm. A clock struck sonorously—midnight. Each boom seemed louder and more threatening than the last. No one approached the Arcade. Harry might have taken fright; Harry might have fooled him. Harry might——

He walked away again; it was a dangerous spot to stand. Another car passed, slowed down at the corner, and then turned

without the driver taking the slightest notice of him. Another—this wasn't a car, but a taxi I It slowed down.

Harry, carrying a big suitcase, climbed out of the cab and paid the driver off. It wasn't imagination that the driver looked at him curiously; but cab drivers were often curious about mysterious night passengers, it would have been better to have met outside a hotel; there were dozens nearby. Forget it. The taxi moved off, and Harry came forward briskly.

"I've got everything I could lay my hands on, sir. Had a bit of luck." He was chirpy.

"Yes?"

"One of the new kind of burners, better than the old oxy-acetylene jobs, not so heavy. Heavy enough, but I can manage to carry it, need two and a car for the other kind. Are we within walking distance, sir?"

"Yes. Let me have the case for a bit."

"I can manage, sir, thank you."

Roger felt like laughing. Or screaming. "I can manage, sir." He let the man have his way, and they walked briskly up Bond Street as far as Brook Street, then turned left. He took the case; it was heavier than Harry had made out. They changed it over three times before they reached the corner of Mountjoy Square.

They turned a corner, and a few yards along came upon a service alley which led to the backs of the houses in the Square. Mountjoy wasn't typical of London squares. On small iron gates, to the tiny courtyards, there were house numbers. Roger didn't light his torch. He peered closely at the numbers, found 23—it was white paint on a black gate, and there was some light from a house opposite.

Next door—25.

And here was 27.

"All right," Roger said.

“I’ll see to the gate,” said Harry.

He didn’t add “sir”; he had dropped the handle. It wasn’t the only change in him—the other was so great that it was almost metamorphosis. Harry seemed to grow in stature and sureness and confidence. This was his real job, and he was a craftsman. The gate was simple, but it was locked. He opened it with a picklock, making no sound at all on the metal. The gate didn’t squeak when it swung back.

The courtyard was flagged. Their rubber-shod feet made hardly a sound. As they drew nearer the dark shape of the house, Roger saw a light; it hadn’t been noticeable from the gate. It was at the top of a window, where light crept past the curtains; and it was at the top floor—the servants’ floor. Harry glanced up, and then looked at the door. He didn’t use a torch, and there seemed to be hardly any light. He ran his fingers over the door gently, not worrying about leaving finger-prints.

“No can do,” he said. “Good job, that, it’s got a burglar-proof fastening on the inside. Think they’re wired up for an alarm?”

“Probably.”

Harry sniffed. Pushed past Roger and went to the long, narrow window near the door. Here, for the first time, he used a torch—one with a hood which could be opened or closed at a touch, and which regulated the beam of light and prevented too much from showing. He stood with his back to the alley and the other houses, and peered into the window. Blinds were drawn, but he was looking at the sides, for the alarm wire. He switched off the light suddenly.

Harry backed away.

“Lot o’ trouble there,” he said. “Might be a first-floor window open. Maybe a ladder. Stay here.”

He vanished, leaving the tool-kit by Roger’s side. He was gone for what seemed a long time, and came back silently as a wraith. ; “Found one?”

“No. Careful, aren’t they?” Harry’s words came in a faint whisper. “Quiet.”

Roger stood aside.

Harry took what looked like a folded rag from the toolkit, then a small can. He poured water over the rag, and then spread it over the window: gummed rag, or paper, deadened sound; but Harry might have forgotten one possibility, that the glass here was toughened. Harry took out a hammer and gave the covered glass a sharp tap.

It gave a curiously dull sound.

He sniffed. “Triplex.” He pulled the rag away, wrapped it up in newspaper and dropped it into the box. Then he I took out a drill and, working swiftly and with very little, sound, drilled four holes, close to each other in the wooden frame. Next, he used a narrow saw, which was just thin enough to go through one of the holes. The saw made hardly a sound, as it was loaded with grease. The line of the cut seemed to leap into the green-painted wood. In less than five minutes, he took a piece of wood out, making a hole big enough for him to reach inside. He did so, using the torch with one hand, groped for the catch and found it.

That made the first real sound—a sharp clang. He stood absolutely still. There was no other sound, no alarm. Harry poked his arm inside again; he was pushing the alarm wire up, away from its wall-fastening. It took a long time, and another car passed in Mountjoy Square, headlights glowing against the houses opposite. Harry didn’t stop working. A faint sound came from the window, and he withdrew his hand.

He pushed the window up. It made little noise, and there was no clangour of an alarm.

“Kit,” he ordered as he climbed through, pushing the curtains to one side. Roger handed him the suit-case, open; it was as much as he could do to lift it. Then he climbed through.

“Going to switch off the current at the main?” he asked.

“Not me! Light on upstairs, ain’t there? If it goes out, they’ll come and investigate.”

How many cracksmen were as good as he?

He adjusted the curtains and then switched on the light. They were in a long narrow kitchen. White tiles glistened, a chromium sink fitting showed. The door faced them.

“Know where we want to go?” asked Harry.

“For a start, the first floor—I know the room.”

“Any vaults here?”

“We’ll have to look and may have to get inside.”

“Okay. Try upstairs first. Know what, don’t you?” Harry looked at him, with a hand on the switch.

“What?”

“There’s one certain way of getting the dicks to have a look round. Ring 999 and report a burglary.”

“That will come later.”

There were two more rooms before they reached the passage leading to the hall. All was in darkness, and only the faintest glow shone from the torch, but it was enough to show the staircase. The thick pile of the carpet became their ally. Harry took the case, shut now, and they went upstairs, Roger in the lead.

Harry whispered: “Who’s at home?”

“I’m not sure.”

“They haven’t any guards.” The words suggested that Harry was beginning to feel nervous; but that was probably due to the fact that the first, worst job was finished and he was suffering from reaction. Give him a safe to open and he would forget his nerves. They reached the door of the study. Harry put the case down softly and tried the handle; the door was locked. He examined it, partly in the dim light from his torch, partly by sense of touch. He nodded, and set to work at once with a picklock.

Harry pushed the door open, gently; there was no light inside. He nodded and stepped in, shining his torch brightly now, but careful to make sure that it didn't shine on the window. Roger closed the door. It closed too sharply, and he heard Harry's soft intake of breath. Nothing happened. Harry moved away from him, his cat's eyes getting him past the furniture without difficulty. He reached the window, and his curiously soft and penetrating voice, even when lowered, came clearly:

"Curtains are drawn—okay."

"Door," said Roger.

"Not a chance."

Roger groped for and switched on the light.

Only two wall-lamps came on; they spread a quiet, subdued light. The room was familiar. He looked at the door, and remembered that he had noticed, on his first visit, that it was specially protected at top, sides, and bottom, to make sure that it was sound-proof; that also made it light-proof when closed, and Harry had realized that. He now had a lot of respect for Harry. The curtains were heavy green velvet with a large, deep pelmet, and they were wide and dropped well below the window. There was little chance of light showing.

Harry said: "Where?"

"You're the boss."

Harry grinned, his confidence fully restored. He roamed about the room, moving this picture, that piece of furniture, scanning the walls with expert eye. Roger took one end of the room, Harry the other. Roger wasn't surprised when he heard Harry whisper: "Okay." He turned. Harry stood by a bookcase which he had eased away from the wall. Roger crossed the room and saw the wall-safe behind it. There were wall-safes and wall-safes, and it was impossible to judge the really good ones from the outside. All there was to see were round pieces of metal and a bright steel knob.

Harry pushed the bookcase farther away; it moved at a touch. He pointed, and showed where it was fastened to a spring hook in the wall; at the first tug, it would seem too heavy for one man to shift, but Harry hadn't been fooled. He pulled a lamp standard nearer and switched it on. Then he took a pair of thin asbestos gloves from the case, drew them on, and picked out a tiny piece of needle-fine wire. He held the point against the steel of the knob; nothing happened. He held it at one of the ridge circles. There was a tiny blue flash. He drew back and grinned.

"Difficult?" Roger asked.

He knew that the orthodox move was to switch off the current at the main. But Harry was teaching him much about the practice of cracking cribs.

"Could be. But if it's electric it isn't so bad. Could be infra-red." Harry sniffed. "That means an alarm, too— wired up liked this, they always ring the alarm."

"Main switch?"

"You and your main switch." Harry grinned. "Stop the alarm where it rings, that's the idea. Most likely place is somewhere outside this room. Maybe there are two, but if we find the control alarm and put it out of action, that will stop the other one. Staying inside?"

"I'll come with you."

They went out again. Harry looked sharply at Roger when he opened the door, but didn't speak. They stood in darkness on the landing. Then Harry put down a light switch; subdued light came on. Nothing stirred, there was no sound. Harry began to roam about the landing, looking towards the ceiling. He didn't have to look far. A box was fastened to the wall, near the ceiling, just beyond the doorway from which the woman had stared at Roger. He brought up a chair; it wasn't high enough. He pointed to an oak chest, and they carried it to the wall and then placed the chair on top of it.

Harry still wasn't satisfied, took the chair away and brought a cloth from a large table. He spread the cloth over the chest; that wasn't to prevent scratching; he took infinite pains to be silent.

He could reach the box comfortably, now. He opened it gently, and inside a large brass bell gleamed. He worked on it for five minutes; they were nerve-racking minutes. Then he turned and whispered:

"Hand me down!"

Roger gave him a hand.

"Okay now," said Harry. "Let's get back."

They went across to the wall-safe, and Harry put a cold chisel between the wainscoting and the wall, and levered part of the wainscoting away. Wood groaned and splintered, but he went on until he had room to work behind it. He had laid bare the electric cable leading to the safe. He put on the asbestos gloves again and took a pair of wire cutters with insulated handles. He cut the cable quickly; the powerful jaws snapped through at one nip. There was a fierce blue flash and a hissing sound; that was all. Harry nodded with satisfaction, straightened up, and turned his attention to the wall-safe. He could have spent time trying to find the right combination; he didn't but took out a compact-looking instrument like a blow-lamp. It was fastened to a small iron cylinder by a long rubber cable. He fiddled with the blow-lamp for a few minutes, and then pressed a lever; a tongue of white-hot flame spat out towards the circular handle.

"Glasses," he said, and then growled: "Only one pair. Look away." He put on a pair of goggles and then turned his attention earnestly to the safe. Roger turned his back on him. Bluish white light filled the room with a garish brightness. He smelt something; molten metal? He was tempted to turn and watch, but knew that it would be crazy, he wouldn't be able to see for an hour or more if he if looked at the flame with his eyes unprotected, so he stared at the

door.

He saw the handle turn.

CHAPTER XX III

KENNEDY'S WIFE

THE flame hissed and glowed as Harry knelt by the safe, intent, unaware of the movement at the door.

The handle turned slowly.

Roger moved towards it. The door was locked, was light-proof and sound-proof. Why had anyone come ? Why was the handle being turned so cautiously? Had Kennedy returned, with suspicions at fever-pitch? Roger waited, watching the handle in that garish light. It didn't fall back, and instead the door began to open.

It opened slowly and slightly, not wide enough for anyone to look into the room, but wide enough for them to see the light and know that burglars were here. It stayed open; the handle didn't move again. He wanted to warn Harry, but a call, even a whisper, would warn whoever was outside. He stepped a pace nearer and glanced over his shoulder. Harry bent low over the safe. The flame dazzled Roger, and he averted his gaze quickly; that glance had been folly.

He closed his eyes to shut out the image of that fierce flame, opened them again cautiously. Door and handle were blurred, but he could see that the door was still open, and the handle hadn't dropped back into position.

It began to move——

The door began to close.

He waited for ten pulsating seconds, then stepped towards it swiftly. Harry said something he didn't catch. The hissing stopped, and only the subdued light of the lamps was on.

"What——" Began Harry.

Roger waved a hand to silence him, reached the door and turned the handle as stealthily as it had just been turned. He heard

Harry grunt as he straightened up, glanced over his shoulder and saw the man approaching. He waved him back again. He opened the door an inch. A light was on in the passage, but no one stood outside the door.

"What is it?" hissed Harry.

"Someone outside. Quiet." The whisper was agonizing, because it might be heard. He opened the door a little wider and looked round. He saw a bright light coming from a door which was closing—Kennedy's wife's door. He saw her shadow on the landing; then it was shut out. Harry was close behind him. "Who——"

"Hold it. Watch." Roger went across the landing, heart thumping, touched the handle of the other door and pushed —she hadn't locked it yet. He heard a ting !; a telephone being lifted. He thrust the door open. Kennedy's wife, so small and exquisite, stood by the side of a bed in a luxury S room. The telephone was at her ear, her great eyes were staring towards the door. At sight of Roger, she drew herself up and terror flared in those eyes. But she didn't take !; the telephone from her ear. Instead, she grabbed at something on the silken pillow—an automatic pistol. She didn't speak.

She hadn't had time to finish dialling. Harry said: *"Strewth!"* His heart was in the word. He stood behind Roger, who moved slowly towards the woman. This was a room of silver and gold, the right setting for beauty. She wore a flimsy, filmy dressing-gown which trailed on the floor, a pale-gold creation. She looked like something out of another, lovelier world—and the automatic was steady in her right hand. She put the ? receiver down slowly, and it clattered on the table; a faint burring sound came from it, she was connected with the exchange. She stretched out her hand and put a finger in one of the dialling holes, but she couldn't judge which to turn while watching him, and she had to watch Roger.

He took a step nearer. Harry followed and closed the door.

“Open it,” she said.

It was the first time he had heard her speak. Her voice was taut with fear, but she was full of courage. Harry didn’t respond. Roger took another step towards her. This was a long room, she seemed a vast distance away from him—ten or twelve yards.

“Don’t come nearer. Open the door.” Her voice was icy cold, now.

Roger said: “Put the gun down if you don’t want to get hurt, and come away from the telephone.” He whispered, although there was no danger of being heard outside the room. He went another step forward, and the gun was trained on his stomach, held so steadily that he knew she wouldn’t miss. He couldn’t watch both her eyes and her hand, and he had to watch her hand. He would see the sudden spasmodic movement if she were going to squeeze the trigger. So he watched her hand, not her eyes, and took another step forward. He felt prickly sweat over his face and neck, and he shivered.

He said: “I don’t want to hurt you. I——”

He jumped to one side as she fired. The bullet spat out with a bright flash. He felt it tear through his coat—and he heard Marry cry out. The bark of the report seemed like a thunderclap.

Roger leapt at her.

She was staring at Harry with horror in her eyes. That was for a split second. She jerked the gun up again as Roger sprang, but she had lost her composure; she fired again, but the bullet smacked into the floor. He reached her, hand thrust out, swung it and pushed her to one side. She struck the side of the bed and toppled on to it, still holding the gun. He grabbed her wrist, and twisted; the gun fell. He snatched it from the bed and backed away.

Harry gasped: “She—she got me.” His voice had a strained, wondering note in it.

Roger glanced at him. He was kneeling, with his right hand

pressed into his side, and blood already seeped slowly through his fingers. He tried to get up, but couldn't. He had his mouth open, and gulped as if he were in pain.

Kennedy's wife stood tiny and erect by the side of the bed, as if trying to defy Roger by her strength of will. The humming sound still came from the telephone, but he wasn't worried about that, only about the door. Had the servants heard those shots? Only seconds had passed, but it seemed an age before he moved. She shrank back. He grabbed her shoulder and span her round, then reversed the gun in his hand. Her hair was short, a cluster of curls. He struck her at the back of the neck, and it was like striking a Dresden figure. She groaned and pitched forward.

She lay still, against the bed.

Roger put the telephone back on its cradle.

Harry said: "I'm—done for."

There was no sound outside on the landing, but whoever came would come stealthily.

"Nonsense." Roger stepped past him. Gun in hand, he I, opened the door cautiously, then drew back and switched off the lights. The landing light glowed faintly. He peered towards the stairs, saw no one and heard nothing except . . . the thunderous beating of his heart. He waited; there was no creaking of approach, no visible shadowy shape. Nothing.

The study door was ajar. He turned, passed Harry again and said: "You'll be all right, Harry." Harry still pressed his hand to his side, and the blood smeared the back of his hand, his face was ghastly. He reached the woman, lifted her and carried her across the landing to the study. She was as light as a child. He dropped her into an easy-chair, and turned and went back for Harry, who knelt in the same awkward position, and licked his lips.

"I'm going to take you into the other room. Take it easy. Just hold your side."

Harry didn't speak.

How did a lean man come to weigh so heavy?

Roger grunted with the strain as he lifted him and took him across the landing. He laid him on the floor, stretched out. He went back into the bedroom, dragged a sheet and two pillows off the bed, and hurried out, closing the door. He closed the study door firmly.

Neither Harry nor the woman moved. He pushed her chair away from a table, so that there was nothing she could pick up stealthily, while he was looking away from her; she would soon come round and might try to fox him. Then he put a pillow under Harry's head. I "Let me have a look."

"I'm—done for," gasped Harry.

"Not yet—not by a long way. A doctor——"

"Don't you—send for one." There was pain instead of fear in Harry's eyes. "You finish the job." He licked his lips again.

Roger said: "Let me have a look at you." He forced Harry's hand away, and the blood dripped on to the carpet. The wound seemed to be on the left side, not dead centre. He unfastened Harry's waistcoat and trousers and pulled up the sodden shirt. Blood oozed out of a wound. He folded a handkerchief into a wad and pressed it on the wound to staunch the flow. "Hold it there, Harry." He put Harry's hand on the pad, and then turned to the sheet. He started a tear with his knife, then ripped off strips. With one, he made a second pad, with another he began to bind Harry's waist. It wasn't easy to pass the bandage beneath the man.

Harry clenched his teeth now, fighting against the pain.

The bandage was in position at last, with a thick wedge over the wound.

Get Harry into hospital now, and he'd have a chance; leave him for an hour, and he'd probably die. Roger glanced at the woman. She seemed to be as he had left her, unconscious.

The safe gaped open, the tools and case stood on the floor

near it. Roger went across. The edge of the metal was still warm to the touch. The safe was much larger than the opening seemed to suggest. There were rolls of paper— thick rolls. Jewel-cases, money, a dozen oddments. He pulled out several of the rolls, which were fastened with thick rubber bands. One lot of paper was stiffer than most— like photographs. He slipped the band off and saw that these were lithographed prints of the dossiers taken from the Yard.

He felt sick with hope and anxiety.

He unfastened another roll, and found sheet after sheet of paper with names and addresses and a few remarks against each. Dozens of the names were familiar; they were people with whom Rayner & Co. dealt, who supplied the short-supply goods—and the type of goods supplied was noted in the remarks column.

Another roll unfurled; more names and addresses, none of them in England—there were several sheets of paper for each country on the Continent. He'd seen some of these names before, too—when he had studied the case against Delaney. So Kennedy had been behind that. Another list of names followed, with a familiar look about them; peers of the realm and—*Members of Parliament*; peers and members of all political parties. Yet another list showed stockbrokers of irreproachable reputation.

There were many more, but Roger didn't look at them. Kennedy kept his records here, that alone mattered. The Delaney contact would give the Yard sufficient to hold him on, and there were other things that would give them the excuse he wanted. He wiped the sweat off his forehead, and turned away.

Kennedy's wile sat in her chair, her eyes wide open, staring at him. Harry's eyes were closed.

He said: "You've had your run. It's all over."

She didn't speak.

He went to Kennedy's desk, glancing at the papers which littered the floor, picked up the telephone and began to dial WHI-

“Don’t do that!” Kennedy’s wife called. “Don’t do it. You’re throwing everything away.”

“Some will go as far as the gallows.” He dialled two numbers —1-2. The last time he had called Scotland Yard was to make that silly inquiry about Sloan, to give Sloan plenty to think about. Where was Sloan now?

“You can be so wealthy——”

“I’m sick of riches.” He finished dialling with another 1-2. He heard the ringing sound. He hardly knew what he felt or thought, except that he was tired—not exhilarated or excited, but tired. He could see Harry’s pale face and closed eyes and didn’t think he could see any sign of breathing. *Brrrr-brrrr; brrrr-brrr*. Why didn’t they answer? *Brrrr-ck!*

“This is Scotland Yard. Can I help you?”

Roger drew in his breath.

“Can I help you?”

“1 am speaking for Detective Inspector Sloan. He wants Squad cars at twenty-seven Mountjoy Square, at once. Also, an ambulance —a man has been shot and badly injured.”

“Is Mr. Sloan there?”

“He’s busy. Hurry.”

“Very good, sir.” The operator didn’t go away. “What is your name, sir?”

West!

“My name is Rayner, Charles Rayner. Will you please hurry?”

“Yes, sir, I’m calling the Squad Room on another line. Let me make sure I have it right, sir. Twenty-seven Mountjoy Square, and you are Mr. Charles Rayner.”

“That’s it.”

Roger put down the telephone. The woman hadn’t moved; nor had Harry. It was deathly quiet in the room. He brushed his hand over his forehead, and it came away filmed with sweat. He didn’t

smile or feel like smiling— and he didn't know why. The Squad Room always moved fast, cars and ambulance would be here in ten minutes. In ten minutes it would be all over, except the proving. He'd taken the chance, and it had come off. There were risks still; to Janet, the boys, and Sloan. How could he persuade the Squad cars to move off as soon as the police were here, so that no one would warn Kennedy, when he arrived. How——

The door opened.

Kennedy came in, with the woman in green behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

HEMMINGWAY

KENNEDY had a gun in his hand.

He stepped into the study quietly, and looked round— and although it was Kennedy, there was something different about him. What? The woman's automatic was in Roger's pocket. He put his hand to his pocket, and Kennedy said: "Don't." The gun covered Roger, and there would be no warning when this man fired.

Kennedy's wife said: "He's just telephoned Scotland Yard, Ray." She was breathless. "Hurry!"

The woman in green walked across the study, stood in front of Roger for a moment, and then struck him across the face. It was a blow as savage as the blaze in her eyes. But she didn't speak. She put her hand into his pocket and drew out the automatic, then backed away.

What was the difference in Kennedy? He was the same man, yet not the same man!

His eyes: they weren't orbs of silver fire, they were ordinary eyes, with nothing remarkable about them. It made a great difference to his appearance.

"What did he tell them?" he asked.

"He just asked them to come here."

"Were there any other men with him?"

"Only that one." Mrs. Kennedy pointed, and stood up. By her husband's side, she looked ridiculously small.

There was a movement at the door, and Percy came in. He started, quickly recovered himself, and said: "I warned you." Kennedy nodded. Not two minutes had passed since his arrival, but they were two precious minutes.

"What—— " began Percy.

Kennedy said: “Collect all the papers, Percy, and take them away. Don’t go to Miss Kennedy’s flat—take them to one of the other places. First thing in the morning, tell Grace Howell to take the kids away from West’s house. I’ll deal with his wife afterwards. Tell Myers to put Sloan away, we won’t need him now—he wouldn’t be safe.”

Percy was already picking up the curled papers, and stuffing them inside his coat.

“Hurry,” said Kennedy dispassionately.

“Okay, okay,” said Percy. “No need to panic, we’ve looked after emergencies like this before.” He stuffed the last rolls of papers away, straightened up—and struck at Roger as he passed.

“Don’t waste time,” said Kennedy.

The Squad cars might be on the way already, but they might not be here in time to prevent Percy from leaving. There was no way of stopping him, except going for him now. That wouldn’t stop but only delay him. Percy passed Harry—paused again, and drove his foot into Harry’s side. Harry whimpered. Roger felt the blood rushing to his head in rage. No one spoke, and Percy went out. Kennedy backed after him, and closed the door. His wife went across the room and opened a cocktail cabinet and poured out three drinks. The seconds dragged. Kennedy looked at Roger with those dull eyes—the eyes that weren’t really his, and the eyes which had made Kennedy so noticeable among a crowd. The woman in green had said it would be impossible to swear that Kennedy was Kennedy. Impossible?

Kennedy came slowly. “Your mistake was in thinking we didn’t check up on your guard, West. We sent a man to see him, every couple of hours. When he wasn’t there, we guessed what had happened. I wish I knew why you did it.”

“Changing a face, you don’t change a mind.”

“I offered you everything——”

Roger said: “Why talk about it? You wouldn’t understand.” His cheeks and chin were smarting. He didn’t see how it would end, now, but Kennedy would get away with it for the time being, because that damning evidence had gone. He wondered what was in the man’s mind, what thoughts were passing behind those odd eyes. Kennedy didn’t look himself; looked a different man; he had become Raymond Hemmingway.

Kennedy shrugged.

“I still don’t understand it, West.”

Roger said: “You can judge a man by his actions, but not by his plans. You tried with me and failed. You used every pressure you could think of—threats to my wife and boys. You failed. I’m no further use to you. My wife and family can’t be. They’ll have enough to worry about, but just to get your petty revenge, you’ll make it worse for them. You’re as cheap as they come.”

Kennedy laughed. “Think so. West? I shall use someone else at the Yard and hold up what happened to your wife and the kids as an awful example. I’ve others marked down. Before I’m through, I shall have several contact men at the Yard. Banister is a good start, but a small one. I shall be able to get away with a lot of crimes with help from the Yard. But there isn’t time to go into detail.” He laughed again. “Just one more detail will interest you. I’m going to shoot you.” He raised the gun. “When the police arrive, I shall tell them the simple truth: my wife heard someone about, came to investigate, found you two in the house, shot one of you, and was overpowered by the other. Then I returned, and caught you red-handed. There’s the open safe, all the evidence. I am not Kennedy here, I am a respected society and businessman, named Hemmingway. I suppose you knew that. I shall pretend to know nothing at all, except that there were burglars and both were shot while trying to get away. That’s justifiable homicide. To make it more realistic, I may wait until the police are at the door—the

sound of a shot would be most impressive, and would prove that I'd waited as long as I dared, and that you made a final desperate attempt to escape." He laughed again. "It was a good throw, West, you almost deserved to succeed. Harry was the weakness, of course. I suppose it was a mistake to use a friend of Ginger Kyle's."

The gun covered Roger's stomach.

There was one thing he'd forgotten, and his wife might forget; that Roger had used Sloan's name. How would he explain that away?

It was very quiet in the room.

The woman in green said: "I shouldn't lose any more time, Ray."

"Perhaps you're right," said Kennedy, and raised the gun a fraction.

Here it came.

Roger braced himself. Better fling himself forward, make a pretence at fighting. Death had an ugly face, and he was looking right into it, it mattered little which way it came.

Then Harry kicked Kennedy.

* * * *

Kennedy, caught unawares, staggered and turned on Harry, who kicked again. Roger swung round on the woman in green. Gun in hand, she was staring at Harry. Roger snatched at the gun. She pulled it free. They grappled, and she fell backwards.

Kennedy fired at Roger. He felt nothing.

He grabbed the woman's gun and flung himself towards the bookcase which stood at right angles to the wall. He felt a bullet tear at his coat and heard the second bark. He thumped against the wall, on the turn. Kennedy was out of sight. Roger waited. All he could see was the desk and the woman, picking herself up. Kennedy was creeping towards him, his only chance now was to shoot on sight. Never had the seconds seemed so long.

Then the door opened; he heard it bang back against the wall.

"What's all this?" a man asked.

Roger knew that voice: this was Peel of the Yard.

* * * *

Roger kept behind the bookcase. Other men came into the room. The woman in green said in a choking voice: "Be careful, he's armed."

"Who's armed?" demanded Peel.

"The thief behind here."

Peel came forward slowly and stealthily. "Don't try any funny stuff," he said. He appeared and didn't flinch, didn't look at the gun.

"We caught them red-handed," said Kennedy, and there was a catch in his voice. "Two of them—he's dangerous, be careful."

"He won't do any harm," said Peel. He held out his hand. "Let me have that gun, please." He was crisp and authoritative, and didn't seem to have a nervous qualm at all. "You're Charles Rayner, aren't you?"

Kennedy said: "Yes, he is. And——"

"We'll talk later," said Peel. "Your gun, Rayner, and don't try any funny stuff."

Roger said: "Get after Myers, the Bilk Street mobsman. He's got Sloan. He's going after West's wife. The maid at the Wests' home is going to kidnap the children."

He held out the gun.

Peel said to a sergeant: "You heard that. Better put in a call. Have Myers picked up and the Wests' maid questioned."

He swung round on Roger. "Where'd you get all this?"

There was a chance for Janet.

"Never mind."

"Inspector——" began Kennedy.

Peel said: "All safe now, Mr. Hemmingway."

Roger moved forward. The woman in green joined Kennedy's wife. Their tension reached screaming pitch. Kennedy, with those pale, dull eyes, was rigid, frowning. He was envisaging the accusations and counter-charges; his mind was working already on a way to discredit "Rayner". It would have been impossible, had those papers been in the room. Now-

There were three men with Peel—familiar Yard men, big, comforting, confident. Two of them came forward and looked at the safe and began to talk in undertones.

"Now I'll hear what you have to tell me, Mr. Hemmingway." Peel was formal, and not particularly friendly. "You say that Mrs. Hemmingway surprised the two thieves and shot one. You arrived and were about to shoot the other——"

"After he had drawn a gun on me."

"Yes, I see. Are there any servants here?"

"On the top floor."

"Weren't they disturbed?"

"No. The burglar alarm had been put out of action."

"You returned with your wife——"

"No, with my sister." Kennedy spoke quietly, and his eyes narrowed in that familiar trick. "My wife was alone on this floor. Do you mind if I get her a drink. Inspector, she has had a nasty shock." He moved towards the cocktail cabinet." And may I warn you not to pay any attention to this man, Rayner? He has a remarkable repertoire of lies." He reached the cabinet, and picked up a bottle.

"No drinks just now, please," Peel said. He was brusque. Kennedy looked at him, as if in surprise. The tiny china doll who was his wife sat down heavily, and buried her face in her hands. The woman in green stared at Roger— only at Roger. The tension in the three of them was at its height.

"Why not?" Kennedy snapped.

“I’d rather you didn’t, sir.”

Kennedy submitted, evidence of nerves.

“Very well. As I say, Rayner will doubtless——”

“What a man says isn’t evidence, sir, at this stage—he would have to offer proof of any charge which he might prefer against you.” Why was Peel so brisk and formal? “Has Detective Inspector Sloan been gone long?”

Mrs. Kennedy caught her breath.

Kennedy said calmly: “Sloan ? I don’t recall the name. Oh—Rayner mentioned it just now.”

“The man who called us said that he was speaking for Sloan. Didn’t you call us?”

“It must have been a mistake. Inspector. I didn’t——”

Mistake? That was Kennedy’s biggest ever! Roger felt warmth pouring through him.

Peel said: “The name of Detective Inspector Sloan was undoubtedly mentioned, sir. Did you call the Yard?”

“No, my chauffeur——”

“I understand that the servants weren’t disturbed.”

Good work. Peel! Keep at it!

“My chauffeur drove me back here. He telephoned——”

“Would he know Mr. Sloan?”

“How the devil do I know?” Kennedy rasped. “He may —he may have mentioned Sloan in order to get you here quickly.”

“We always come quickly, sir. Where is your Chauffeur?”

“He’s not here.” Kennedy licked his lips. The woman in green sat on the arm of the china doll’s chair. Both of them stared at Peel, ignoring Roger.

“So I observe, sir,” said Peel. “That is what puzzles me —why isn’t he here? Why did you send him out?”

“I didn’t send——”

“Then why did he go out?” asked Peel.

Peel had grown into a giant. Roger moved away and sat on the edge of the desk. The two sergeants talked in whispers, but he hardly noticed them, only heard Peel and Kennedy.

Kennedy said: "I have no idea. I didn't know that he had gone out."

"You didn't know that we caught him, either, did you, sir? A patrol car came here immediately on receipt of the alarm, and your chauffeur was met on the doorstep. He had a number of papers with him—papers apparently taken from the safe here. He said that you had instructed him to leave with those papers. He was quite surprised by his detention, and had no time to think up a lie for us — sir. Why did you send your chauffeur out with papers taken from the safe?"

Kennedy didn't speak.

His wife leaned forward and hid her face in her hands.

"We'll have to know sooner or later, sir," said Peel, whose voice kept on the same monotonous level all the time, "Is there something you wish to hide from us?"

Kennedy said: "I think you're exceeding your duty, Inspector." He glanced at Roger; and he still held the gun. He raised it slightly. "I have charged these two men with——"

A sergeant, behind Kennedy, came up quietly. Before Kennedy knew what was happening, the sergeant took the gun. He swung round, fist clenched to strike, stopped himself, and glowered at Peel.

"I insist——"

"Just a moment, sir, if you please." Peel raised his hand —and footsteps sounded outside on the landing; one or two men were coming in. Roger watched, with increasing tension, not yet sure that it was over and that he could live again. Percy came in—thrust by someone whom Roger couldn't see at first. Percy's face was as pale as Harry's and his eyes glittered with fright. He felt Kennedy's

gaze on him, but couldn't meet his employer's eyes. He came forward, pushed again—and then Sloan came into the room. Roger cried: "Bill!"

Sloan, one eye closed, coat dirty and torn, grinned across at him. Peel started in astonishment. A sergeant stood impassively by the door, holding the gun he'd taken from Kennedy.

"Hallo, Roger," said Sloan easily. "I felt pretty sure who you were, earlier to-night."

Peel choked: "Roger West——"

Kennedy took a step forward. "Yes, the renegade policeman ! The man who forced me to——"

"All statements will be taken down in due course, sir," said Peel. But his voice was unsteady, he gaped at Roger. "A superintendent is on his way, he will take charge." He gulped. "It can't be," he whispered.

"It is," said Sloan. "What a present for Janet!" Kennedy's face had turned a dirty grey.

CHAPTER XXV

PRESENT FOR JANET

IT was nearly three hours later before Roger talked.

Chatworth, who had arrived soon after Sloan, sat with Sloan and Peel in the drawing-room of 27 Mountjoy Square, and listened. A sergeant took the statement down in shorthand. It began unsteadily, almost incoherently, grew steadier as the minutes passed. The picture of those two sombre months gradually filled in, both for Roger and for the others.

Upstairs, men were going through the papers.

Kennedy and his wife and sister were held in separate rooms. Percy was on his way to Scotland Yard, Harry was already at the nearest hospital.

Roger knew a little more: that Peel and two other men had followed Sloan that night, and had seen him taken away from Lyme Street by Myers and his men. They'd followed, and rescued him; Myers and the men who had come to Lyme Street were already in custody, so was Grace Howell.

Roger talked on. . . .

He was dry, but forgot the whisky and soda by his side; tired, but talking vividly, with words welling out of him. He didn't smile, didn't alter the pitch of his voice, just talked—as he might have talked to a doctor, about nightmares—a two-month nightmare. Detail after detail built itself into the picture, giving it light and shadow.

He stopped, and sipped his drink.

Chatworth said after a long pause: "But why, Roger? Why?"

"You mean, why did I allow myself to be established as Rayner? Why didn't I come to you?"

"No, no, you've made that obvious. You'd a chance to find

who this Kennedy was, what he was doing. I think I see what drove you to that." Chatworth was gruff. "Only way you could make sure of the proper finish was to trap him—Kennedy. Can't imagine any other man standing up to the strain. Never mind that now. What I mean is, why did Kennedy do all this? Why?"

"We'll know better when we have finished an examination of the papers upstairs," Roger said.

"Inspector Chubb is going through them, he ought to have some ideas now." Peel stood up. "Shall I go and see, sir?"

Chatworth grunted: it might have been "Yes."

Peel went out. Chatworth drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. Sloan sat back, with a fatuous grin on his bruised face. Peel was gone for a long time, but none of them moved. Chatworth couldn't keep his eyes off Roger. He was looking at the new man, trying to see some semblance of the old. He shook his head, slowly, three or four times.

Peel came in, with glowing eyes and a sheaf of papers.

"Well?" barked Chatworth.

"Got it pretty well sewn up, sir! These lists and some other documents tell a tale! Kennedy has been at this for years, gradually building up a system of blackmail. He can put pressure on hundreds of people. Hundreds!" Peel was so excited that he rapped a table with a roll of paper. "It's so big, it's frightening. The key is blackmail, everywhere. He got something on these people and put the black on them—people who supplied those goods to Rayner & Go. did so because Kennedy squeezed—they had to. That was the smallest angle. He's had his claws in Members of Parliament, peers of the realm, people of influence everywhere. He's deep in the currency racket and other forms of smuggling. There's a list here of his contact men—all crooks we've got on our records. He told them what to do, gave them a rake-off. Myers has admitted that —he got his orders from the chauffeur, Percy Briggs. There's an elaborate

organization, and we only know the beginning of it yet. Kennedy lived here as Hemmingway, and trusted only his wife, sister, and Briggs.

"He was planning wholesale blackmail and corruption. At the Board of Trade, the Treasury—any Government Departments that would be profitable. He wanted a good cover, and didn't want to show himself much. A man named Rayner, who worked with him for some years, backed out and went to Africa, where he made a packet in diamonds. He——"

"Who's told you this? It isn't in those documents, is it?" Chatworth was abrupt.

Peel grinned. "No, sir, but Myers and Briggs have let a lot come out. I've just had a word with the Yard, sir. This man Rayner died some years ago. When Kennedy planned to corrupt West and turn him into a big cover for the whole job, he gave West Rayner's name, passport, background—-everything. I've got some other details, too. Kennedy himself—that's his real name—first thought of getting at men at the Yard, and incidentally he did get at one, sir, more of that later." Chatworth opened his mouth, closed it again. Peel went on eagerly: "Then Kennedy had his big notion, of having a prominent Yard man to work for him. He plumped for West. He probed a bit, and discovered that Mrs. West had a cousin who lived in Surrey, and worked out the whole frame-up from there."

"That French girl——" began Sloan.

Peel said: "Yes, Briggs has talked about her, too. She was in love with Kennedy. He went to see her, in Paris, calling himself Arthur King, to find out whether she knew anything about her father, Kyle. He fascinated her. and he was always after beautiful women. Ginger Kyle knew more about Kennedy than anyone else alive, and Kennedy was just checking up and fell for her. But he didn't bargain on her following him to England. Kennedy thought that she was really probing into his plans, and she fell in nicely with

the plot to frame Mr. West. Kennedy took over Copse Cottage, and arranged for her to meet him there It was he who actually killed her and attacked West." Peel was hoarse from talking and from excitement now. "Of course, there are a lot more details to come, but the general scheme's pretty obvious. Percy Briggs can't talk fast enough, he knows it's the only way to save his neck. When Kennedy wanted a job done—murder or any job—he knew exactly whom to use. He was born in the East End, according to Briggs. The real Hemmingway— the man he's supposed to be here—lived and died abroad. Kennedy took his place. As Hemmingway had no close friends in England, Kennedy got away with it.

"We've enough to charge Kennedy and the women with now —shall I take them to the Yard?"

"Do that," said Chatworth.

* * * *

Chatworth said slowly: "I can't take it all in, Roger. It's too much for me." He pulled his lips. "Never heard me say that before, and you never will again. How any man kept the truth away from his wife for that time— and knowing you and your wife——"

"And knowing what Kennedy had fixed against me," Roger said.

"Yes, yes. Well—it's nearly five o'clock. Er—what about your wife? You can't spring yourself on her. She—damn it, she won't recognize you! The boys won't——"

"I'll ask Mark Lessing to go and see her," said Roger. "I'll see Lessing right away, if that's all right with you."

Chatworth said: "Do what you like." He shook his head, wonderingly. "When this breaks—oh, never mind. Never mind. Go and see Lessing."

* * * *

Sloan drew up in his car and waved as Roger stepped out of Hemmingway's house.

"They're under lock and key, Roger. Briggs is still talking. Man, of ideas, this Kennedy. He had a trick of putting drops in his eyes—not bella donna, but something like it. It changed his whole appearance. Very few people would have thought them the same man, when with Kennedy, you would be so fascinated by his eyes you wouldn't take much notice of his features."

"You're telling me!" Roger said.

Sloan grinned; he was a happy man.

"He thought you were safe when he fixed that body. Remember I told you?"

Roger said: "Yes, Bill. You've been——"

"Forget it!"

"Never."

* * * *

Later, Roger sat in Mark Lessing's car, outside the Bell Street house. It was a little after six o'clock. Some traffic was on the road, and two or three people walked past the end of it. In Bell Street, there was sleepy quiet—even the boys were still asleep.

Mark was gone a long time. Cigarette after cigarette stub joined others on the kerb by the car.

Then Mark appeared, and beckoned.

He didn't speak when Roger passed him at the gate.

Janet stood in the doorway.

The early morning light fell on Roger's face. He approached her slowly, his heart beat furiously and breath bated.

It was more than two months since they had met, and Roger saw all the evidence of strain; and he also saw the light in her eyes. She watched him, studying every feature. Slowly, she stretched out her hands, and they were trembling. He took them; they were hot. He drew her gently towards him, and then suddenly she began to cry.

Janet sat on a pouf in front of him, head back, radiance in her

eyes again. She held his hand tightly, as if she were afraid that if she let it go, she would never touch it again.

Upstairs, Scoopy called: “Richard. Richard!”

There was no answer. . “Richard!” Scoopy’s voice grew louder. “I’m awake. Wake up, I’m awake.”

Roger felt as if the fierceness of his thumping heart would suffocate him.

He said: “What will they say? I’ve thought about it a million times. They won’t know me, they——”

“They’ll know you. Just talk to them.” Janet’s voice broke. “I’ll tell them—you’ve—oh, I’ll tell them anything, it doesn’t matter, they’ve got you back, I’ve got you back! Roger, it was terrible, I just hadn’t any hope. I——”

“I daren’t——”

“Of course you daren’t. Don’t blame yourself, don’t worry.” Tears welled up in her eyes, but she didn’t really cry as she went on chokily: “It’s not a bad face. Roger, I think I like it better, in some ways it——”

She couldn’t keep the tears back; but a moment later she was laughing loudly.

There was sudden silence upstairs, and then Richard said in his clear voice: “Mummy’s downstairs.”

“Grace isn’t in her room,” said Scoopy.

“Mummy!”

“Mummy!”

“I’ll be up soon, boys. You can go into—Richard’s room, Scoopy. Don’t make too much noise.”

They laughed, delighted.

Roger said hoarsely: “He was in Richard’s room already. Nothing’s changed. God! I’ve got to see them, Jan. I must see them. I——”

“I’ll go and talk to them,” said Janet. “I won’t be long.” She

stood up, then leaned over him and kissed him, and he felt her damp cheek on his. She swung round and hurried out of the room.

Mark was in the garden, hands in pocket, back towards the window, shoulders squared; cheerful again.

Janet said clearly: “Now listen, boys, I’ve a surprise for you.”

“You’ve been crying,” accused Scoopy.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Richard, defensively.

“No. No.” She could hardly get the words out. “Now— listen, boys. I’ve a big surprise. I’m not really crying, I—I’m laughing. Something wonderful—wonderful has——”

Scoopy cried: “Daddy’s back! Daddy’s come back!”

“Daddy!” shrieked Richard.

“Boys! Just a moment, it is Daddy, but——”

They were tumbling about on the landing as she tried to tell them what to expect.

* * * *

It would be all right; everything would be all right. He was alive again.

THE END